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Philosophy as Culture: Getting Rid of the Professional “of” in Philosophy as a Way of Life

Douglas Anderson interviewed by Eli Kramer

EK: Are there lived aspects of philosophy of culture? Can philosophy of culture be a way of life?

DA: I think I would start by rephrasing the question. As history tells us, Greek philosophy was not a profession but a feature of living – an active search for a good life. It was not driven by final answers but, if Plato is to be believed, by an ongoing *eros* for beauty and goodness. The phrase “philosophy of culture” reminds me of what the profession calls an area of specialization or competence. For me, it is better to think of philosophy – a love of wisdom – as one aspect of cultural life. In this way, I see every culture as being philosophical. Oddly, our profession often denies the term “philosophy” to Asian thought, to American Indian thought, and so forth. Again, as I view things, this is not only a colossal and misplaced arrogance but a thorough misunderstanding of the life of philosophy. So, as I understand the question, my answer is “yes” – it is possible to live philosophically. This does not mean that I have to identify as a “metaphysician,” or a “Kantian,” or a “utilitarian.” For the Greeks this seems obvious, but among those whom we might include in the circle of “philosophy” after 1900 William James seems to me to best understand this and to resist the professionalization that has simply led to political manipulation of who is to be included in or excluded from the profession. Ironically, I have found few professional philosophers who, as I understand it, live philosophically. They tend to create and write argumentative materials and then leave it all behind when they go home to their daily lives.

EK: What do you think are some of the most important living values and/or ideas from philosophy of culture?

DA: Philosophy, for me, is not stuck in professional articles. My students over the last several generations get most of their philosophical takes from music and film. That's where the questions of life get asked and receive provisional answers of one sort or another. One cannot get half-way through a punk song or a hip hop/rap piece without encountering questions of wisdom and living well or poorly. In that sense, I believe all aspects of our lives have philosophical import – our social and political arrangements, the foods we eat (or do not eat), the arts we pay attention to. How are *Guernica* and, say, Aretha Franklin's *RESPECT* not philosophical texts? If all of philosophy were simply what professionals write, it would seem pretty irrelevant to most contemporary cultures. Our profession has become a cloistered home for little arrogances.

EK: If and what distinguishes American philosophy of culture from other traditions?

DA: In the profession, "American philosophy" has a pretty specific meaning. Those of us who have studied it in detail will include everyone from Edwards to Susanne Langer and all points in between. Currently, since some analytic philosophers have become interested, it simply means "pragmatism" in all its guises. For me, the professional account of American philosophy is not nearly broad enough. In the most serious ways, something called "American" philosophy should be traced to the lives of indigenous cultures. After that, we might talk about all the *mestiza* developments in American cultures. New England life and thought is quite distinct from that in Alabama and Texas. Texas itself is multifaceted, and America is, of course, an invention and a history – it includes a north and a south continent, Central America, and the Caribbean, not just the U.S.. Again, cultural arrogances and exceptionalisms tend to get in our way. Pragmatism and other schools of American thought developed within this historical and geographical context.

What distinguishes "American" philosophy, or any philosophy, has to do with place, with climate, with history and tradition, with desires and goals, and with what's "going on," as we like to say. So, let me answer not by saying, for example, that pragmatism teaches things differently than does idealism and so on. Rather, let's think about why peoples of the Amazon and peoples of the Arctic experience the world differently and see how that affects the ways they think about life and the ways they actually live. Texas is hot – unbelievably hot. Today, in affluent Texas, people do not do things outdoors – they live entrenched in air-conditioned venues. This leads to one way of thinking about the world and how one should live. But, if one is impoverished and living without air conditioning, life takes on a whole different set of meanings. The sun means one thing when you can avoid the intensity of its heat on your back; it means something other when you are working outdoors with no shade at hand. Within any part of Texas you will at least have these two different sorts of cultural habits and the beliefs that attend them – two quite radically different cultures. And, to live philosophically, folks in these cultures will have to think about their relations to other culture or cultures. This is why, I think, folks like DuBois and Enrique Dussel see thoughtfulness beginning with the oppressed and excluded – if you live in the air conditioning, you can afford not to worry about the experiences of those who do not have it. But, if you're poor and in the beating sun, you will be reflective about the differences, about the reasons why some have the air-conditioned life and others do not. In this sense, philosophy is a pervasive human endeavor that is done both poorly and well. I think with Gloria Anzaldúa that it is better to start with the actuality of our *mestizaje*, our mixedness, and not with some idealized story of pedigree and purity. Again, we have it backward if we start with "American" philosophy. Let's start by asking what this multi-faceted place we have come to call "America" offers us in the way of experiences – what habits and beliefs does it enable or produce? In short, let's chase the ongoing growth of our canons and not start with the canons as if they were fixed entities. Colombia has its own philosophies, for example, not because it is "Colombia" but because it involves the mixing of European and indigenous cultures, because it grows cacao and coffee, because it has volcanos and beaches, and dark muddy rivers, and so on. We have to look to the everyday to see philosophy at work – or to note its absence. Or, as Emerson noted, we must look to the

ordinary to find the extraordinary. What is now being called “engaged philosophy” is fine but note that it takes philosophy to be something that is separate and needs to be integrated. I do not see it that way. What I think of as living philosophically is always already engaged – it does not mean that we “apply” utilitarianism to animal welfare. Philosophies in that sense grow from the ground up, from experience outward – and that is something we should *not* forget but seem to routinely forget. Our so-called profession grew out of experience, not the other way around. Let’s get back to experiencing the world and to being thoughtful about and attentive to our experiences, and let’s develop our future conduct in light of our various experiences.

Now let me return to the question regarding the professional account of American philosophy. Edwards, Margaret Fuller, Emerson, Thoreau, William James, John Dewey, Jane Addams, W.E.B. DuBois, and many others did create philosophies of culture. They aimed to be engaged in social reform and in the issues of their day. Consider Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* or Thoreau’s *Walden*. But what is important to see is that this kind of philosophizing grew out of a time and place, and identifies only a few particular kinds of American philosophy. Bolivar defines another in South America; José Martí defines another in Cuba; and Marcus Garvey another in Jamaica. Moreover, with a bit of searching, we will find philosophies of women, of people of color, of mestizas, of indigenous cultures. We must allow and help the canon to grow.

EK: Do you think the future of philosophy of culture is in the university, or does it lie beyond it?

DA: I think the future of philosophy always lies outside of the university. As noted, universities tend to bureaucratize and codify. This is why scholasticism got its name. We are equally scholastic in our universities today – we have “analytic” programs and “continental” programs, each with its own language and canon. People outside the academy for the most part do not get the distinctions or simply do not care. But everyday ethical questions are open for philosophical reflection. So too, aesthetics – from film, music, and fine arts, to football and *fútbol*. Philosophy is already in the world; what we do at the universities so far is to make it technical, codified, and formal. This need not be a terrible thing until it forgets its origins and begins to think that philosophy is something that *only* belongs to universities. My judging the taste and look of varieties of chocolates or wines is already a philosophical endeavor; I do not need to have read the history of aesthetics, though that history might make my judgments more interesting to me in some ways. Perhaps this is what Richard Rorty meant when he tried to argue that philosophy was edifying. But our judgments may also be made more interesting by engaging in more and more developed experiences. These need not always happen, and often cannot happen, in university settings.

EK: What sort of relationship should a lived philosophy of culture have with wilderness and nature?

DA: I like Henry Bugbee’s thought that we all find ourselves in a wilderness if we are awake. We do not know the beginnings and endings of our histories. We are on a planet that we know to be moving, but to where we do not know. The same for our galaxy. There is no escaping wilderness and that is an inspiration to reflect on just what we can grasp by way of our experiencing. Accepting that we find ourselves in this sort of wilderness means that our conversations about meanings and importances are a way of “playing for keeps” with our lives and our cultures. It is also reason to have some sense of humor about our reflective abilities – we are not gods and we should always remember this. “Wilderness” in the other sense – as a place too wild for our civilized selves – I am more wary of. What Europeans defined as wilderness in North America was simply “home” for most indigenous peoples. When I move through the Bronx, I think I have entered a wilderness. In that sense of the word, I think living philosophically may have something to say, but we should be careful to attend to the context when we call something a “wilderness.” For “nature,” I think much the same. At the far end, everything IS nature – what else could it be? Human cultures, like beehives, are natural phenomena. All the animals we know – and we simply do not know about other planets, for example – are readers of the signs of nature. We

humans try to piece together a “world” out of our perceptions and reflections. So, at the broadest level I think philosophy is always about wilderness and nature; at the narrower level there are particular relations, but they must be given context. This is one of the most difficult issues for something called environmental philosophy. But if we take nature and wilderness as our home setting, we will always have a concern for our environment – it is where we live and is that which makes our lives and meanings possible.

EK: Is there a relationship between philosophy of culture and wandering?

DA: The relationship between philosophy and wandering is something I have thought about for a long time. Again, following Bugbee, I believe we are always wanderers. And, as Dewey says, we tend to always seek stability – this is the draw of conservatism. Life seems easier if we can count on things not to change or if we can conveniently ignore change. I find that sort of conservatism to be a considerable danger. I would prefer that we embrace our wandering natures and live philosophically with them. Our lives move from cradle to grave but there are so many roads and avenues to explore. We cannot choose them all – and sometimes we cannot choose at all. When I see myself as a wanderer, I think I am better able to handle the contingencies and idiosyncrasies of the world. We often have to use what is at hand if we want to make music or art – or build a house. To wander is not to be fully lost but to be exploring, learning, and wondering. One of my issues with the history of idealistic philosophies is that they have always tried to place everything – to give everything, as Bradley says, its station and its duty. I prefer to see our lives as developing creations – physically, spiritually, intellectually we are always in the process of growing, revising, making, creating. I think that wandering is one way to think of our lives and cultures that keeps us attentive to this ongoing creativity in life.

EK: When did you first become acquainted with philosophy of culture? If, and how, have you continued to engage with it in your life and teaching?

DA: Because I began “philosophy” with the Greeks, I have always been engaged in what we might now call philosophy of culture. It is pretty difficult to discuss Socrates without attention to Athenian and Greek life – from politics to religion to *poiesis* to horse training to mathematics and so forth. My later interest in “American philosophy” was driven by much the same. I have from the beginning tried to resist seeing Plato as a set of arguments and fortunately I have had a number of teachers who brought that home to me in various ways. Teachers/mentors such as John McDermott and John E. Smith never let me get away with isolated arguments – philosophy, again, arises in the midst of our cultural experiences. My own teaching has followed their model. It is fine to grasp and to work with the canonical stories, but we should always be looking for what has been left out. For example, in my view, it is never acceptable to leave Sappho out of the conversations on Greek thought. She represents not only the presence but the absence of women in our “histories of philosophy.” But, for me, Plato or Margaret Fuller or Hegel or Kant or Susanne Langer or de Beauvoir are of little value outside of their cultural contexts. They were makers and observers of their worlds. For us, their thoughts and worries are things we must bring into relation with our own lives. Short of that, they are indeed “dead” thinkers. Our conversations with the history of ideas must always be felt by us now as well – so, that is what I encourage students to consider. Ideas can transcend time, but they must always find a home in the present and in our immediate experiences and conversations.

The last question – the one about my own life – is more difficult. I like to think that I try to live philosophically – to be a learner. But I am too well aware of hubris and self-deception to move too far in that direction. I think I do my best to live reflectively and perceptually. But as James often noted, we all have our blindnesses and we are often unaware of them. I try to engage my culture in as many ways as I can, but, like everyone else, I am selective – the world is too rich for all us. Maybe the best way I can put it, is that I try to adopt on most

days the early Cynics' penchant for humor – having a sense of humor, even as we struggle with serious questions, seems to me a good way to go about life.

EK: Beyond the dogmas of the profession and the university, and keeping in mind, as you have, the “geographic” situatedness of philosophy, what do you see as the role and the mission of the philosophy teacher?

DA: I suspect my account of the role of the philosophy teacher may be a bit outmoded. I am still of a mind that in teaching philosophy our aim is to enable folks to become more interesting people. There are a variety of skills involved in this – an ability to read with depth and insight, a willingness to be wrong and to learn, an ability to write clearly and persuasively, and an ability to teach others. I do not think this occurs simply from reading and responding to philosophical arguments. I think handling such argumentation is a worthwhile skill, but I do not think it is sufficient. A philosophically-minded student should be able to engage culture in all its guises, from politics to the arts. And I am in agreement with Socrates on this; we cannot “make” philosophically-minded students. On the contrary, we have to try to enable or engender such an outlook in students. In our teaching this can happen in a variety of ways, from the materials we teach to our various modes of presenting that material. I also think there is an element of modeling involved. I know that my teachers and mentors had such an effect on me. Those teachers who tended to be dogmatic defenders of “positions” had much weaker effect on my life and thought than did those who provoked me and encouraged me to find my own way. But I am also aware that students are not of a piece, and that my teaching style, while effective for some, may not be effective for others. It seems reasonable to have a variety of teaching modes in play such that students might find their own avenues to being philosophical.

I do think there are some rough necessities. Living philosophically requires a kind of flexibility in being. We live in a world where our best answers are probable and many more are on the order of possible, or simply become matters of faith. This is not always the most comfortable place to be, but it is where we find ourselves. Learning to live in the midst of precariousness and uncertainty is much like learning to paddle in whitewater. No matter how good we get, we must always be ready for surprises. And yet, surprises are often problematic for human animals. Learning an attitude of preparation for surprise – or in, Socratic fashion, for death – is not an easy task. I think our teaching of philosophy can help folks to learn something of that attitude. At the same time, living with uncertainty need not lead us to skepticism and nihilism; we can learn to be fully committed to ameliorating our conditions even in the midst of the indeterminacy of the future. We can learn to aim for good lives even when our conceptions of a good life may be undergoing revision.

In short, I think we can teach toward the old model of enabling a well-rounded existence – moral, aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual well-being. I think teaching is both difficult and rewarding. And the rewards are to be found in the lives of our students – not just their intellectual or scholarly successes, but also in their happiness and their abilities to handle the difficulties of life. In that sense, perhaps, we always remain at some level the teachers of our students. That seems to me a worthy life endeavor.