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For the Love of Wisdom

Philosophy: (Gr. philein, to love – sophia, wisdom)
Dagobert D. Runes, *The Dictionary of Philosophy*

“America does not think much of its philosophers,” Douglas Anderson writes in his introduction to *Philosophy Americana*. “We do not teach philosophy in our high schools. A majority in America have no idea what philosophy is about or why it might be interesting, if not important.”

Perhaps that lack of appreciation for philosophy is coeval with its beginnings when the ancient Athenians put Socrates to death. Anderson’s lament is clearly present from the supposed birth of Western philosophy, and vividly so in 1486 in Italian humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s discourse known as *The Dignity of Man*, where he states, “The whole of philosophy (such is the unhappy plight of our time) is occasion for contempt and contumely, rather than honor and glory. The deadly and monstrous persuasion has invaded practically all minds, that philosophy ought not to be studied at all or by very few people; as though it were a thing of little worth to have before our eyes and at our fingertips....Thus,” Pico said six centuries ago, “we have reached a point, it is painful to recognize, where the only persons accounted wise are those who can reduce the pursuit of wisdom to a profitable traffic.”

So it seems today in America and so it has apparently been and will ever be. Nevertheless, Anderson hopes to open a discussion about how philosophy does and does not manifest itself in American culture, how its practitioners remain “invisible,” and largely misunderstood “in rural, laboring, underclass, and unschooled settings.” It is not his intention, at least in this book, to take up the issue of race in a discipline as overwhelmingly white as Western philosophy. Yet this has been for me, a black American philosopher, a lifelong meditation, which I will attempt to address in this essay.

Philosophy, which is arguably the oldest intellectual discipline in the Western world, the one from which so many others separated themselves in the seventeenth (physics), eighteenth (chemistry), nineteenth (biology), and twentieth (psychology) centuries, is a field in which researchers Tina Fernandes Botts, Liam Kofi Bright, Myisha Cherry, Guntur Mallarangeng, and Quayshawn Spencer in 2014 were able to identify in their article “What Is the State of Blacks in Philosophy?” that are only 156 black Americans who had earned the Ph.D. Their top areas of specialization are Africana, Race, Social and Political, Ethics, and Continental philosophy.

This startling poverty of black Americans in philosophy is something I encountered as early as my teens, and in 1974, my second year in the philosophy doctoral program at Stony Brook University, a report published in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* stated that “only *thirty-five* blacks with the terminal degree in philosophy could be identified nationwide: ‘one black Ph.D in philosophy for every million black citizens.’” This lonely situation of black philosophers being so few and far between is no doubt one reason why the American Philosophical Association has been sending to undergraduate philosophy programs in America and Canada, posters featuring writers, artists, and others who at one time studied philosophy and are quoted stating why they found that experience valuable. I am on one such poster with the statement, “The questions of the good, the true, and the beautiful – those were my questions. I realized I had to do philosophy for the rest of my life. That was the beginning of my passion.”

My poster does not say philosophy is merely something one studies. Rather, it is something we *do*. A truth-seeking activity. For some of us it is also a passion. For me that passion was ignited when I was eighteen years old and, although I was a journalism major as an undergraduate, I took my first two philosophy courses at Southern Illinois University, one required (Introduction to Logic) and the other an elective (a course on the pre-Socratics). My teachers wisely understood that if one is going to become a journalist, a newspaper reporter, then he or she better know something about the logical fallacies appearing in “arguments” by politicians and also in advertising. With that course, I felt I had been given an antidote for the illogical statements I remembered people making all around me as I was growing up in an urban “laboring, underclass and unschooled setting.” I felt empowered to defend myself from those who hoped to manipulate my thoughts and feelings. But it was the other course on the pre-Socratics that cemented my lifelong devotion to philosophy.

That large, lecture course was taught by a young professor, John Howie, who was beginning his first year at the university. Somehow (I do not know how) and with a gift he had (I do not know what), Dr. Howie was able to sing the ethical questions Democritus and Epicurus wrestled with in a way that made me realize for the first time that many of the social issues I was publishing editorial cartoons about in the late 1960s – I was a professional cartoonist and illustrator for seven years, starting when I was 17 years old – were issues debated and discussed with sophistication two thousand years before the birth of the American republic. He made me see that the quality of the questions we ask determines the quality of the answers we get. And those great themes of ancient Greek philosophy about what might be the good, the true, and beautiful? Those spoke as deeply to me as the literal meaning of philosophy as “the love of wisdom.” As deeply as the three maxims inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi: (1) Know thyself, (2) Nothing to excess, and (3) Surety brings ruin. Or as deeply as Plato’s idea that philosophy was preparation for death in his dialogue the *Phaedo*, and Socrates’s statement in *The Apology* that the unexamined life is not worth living. To put this another way, that early exposure to philosophy set me on a course where I would be asking myself during every stage and season of my life, *How should I live?*

One pleasure of studying one philosopher after another when I was taking journalism courses was in my discovery that each gave me a different way of thinking about the world. An important side effect of this was that it made me listen to others with what phenomenologist Herbert Spiegelberg in *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (Vol. Two) called “epistemological humility” and put on hold my youthful ego. In the effort to understand, say, William James or Wittgenstein, what was important was not what *I* thought

but instead understanding what *they* thought. The humility involved in making an effort to grasp the arguments and feelings of others served me well in my youth and, later when I began writing novels, enabled me to imaginatively inhabit the different views of the world held by my characters or others, seeing the world from their perspectives, and being capable like anyone in a debate to present an opponent's argument as he or she would before carefully examining it for errors.

Unfortunately, in the "laboring, underclass, and unschooled settings" of my youth, these benefits associated with the study of philosophy – and even the college experience during America's early days of racial integration in the late 1960s – were seldom appreciated. For my parents, and so many of my fellow black students during my undergraduate years, the only value of college was, as one friend, a business major, put it to me, "that little piece of paper" or diploma that would improve his employment possibilities. They did not hesitate to declare that their daily struggle to survive left no time for being concerned about whether they were living an examined life. I knew my parents felt the same way. In 1966 I was the first person in my family to go to college. Naively, I thought college was a place where one went to receive – here is that word again – "wisdom." I was quickly disabused of such naivety my first year on campus. When I informed my mother and grandmother during my junior year that I wanted to switch my major from journalism to philosophy, they panicked, wailing "What are you going to *do* with *that*?" Someone else I knew in college, a young black woman told me after I expressed my passion for philosophy, "Oh, you BS a lot, don't you?"

During the years I worked on my master's degree, I knew of only one other black philosophy student, who as a teaching assistant served as the discussion group leader in my aforementioned logic course. We both earned our doctorates at Stony Brook University. We are long-time friends. But his interests, although we talked often, were restricted to race and politics. In one of our conversations in the 1970s, he told me that he felt it was all right for black people to lie if the lie helped black people. (Presumably, he felt this way because whites lie so it was fine for black people to do so also for their wellbeing.) With him I could never easily discuss my interest in aesthetics, different ontologies, literature and philosophy, Buddhism and Taoism, or philosophy's possible significance for the daily lives of black Americans. I felt, as one would a chronic ache, the hunger for an intellectual community based not on race, gender, class or politics but on other, more diverse intellectual and spiritual interests.

I could have been offended by that young woman's remark that philosophers are bullshitters, but I was not. If she had been exposed to any form of philosophy in the 1960s, it was probably the analytic tradition, which is overwhelmingly the orientation in American programs of philosophy. There are many sides of philosophy, with areas like Continental and Eastern philosophies being latecomers to the discipline. One might call analytic the science side, with the particular strengths and drawbacks associated with that way of examining the world. For some black students, those drawbacks proved to be frustrating.

In her magisterial work of literary criticism, *Charles Johnson in Context*, Linda Furgerson Selzer, writes that in the 1960s "the generation of students entering philosophy programs felt the conflict between the cloistered academy and outside world acutely owing to the pressing concerns of the civil rights movement and the expansion of the Vietnam War.... The conflict between their academic aspirations and their social commitments was, understandably, especially intense." She reminds us that philosopher Lucius Outlaw had written that, "academic pursuits could seem frivolous in the face of the social and political upheavals of the 1960s," leading him to wonder, "with all those people moving in the streets, what was the point of my sitting at my desk and trying to make sense of *Being and Nothingness*?" Similarly, in George Yancy's 1998 work, *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*, Anita L. Allen indicates that analytic philosophy at Yale felt removed from current events. "As a Black person," she recalls, "it felt odd to sit around asking questions like 'how do you know when two nonexistent objects are the same?'... There you are in the middle of the era of affirmative action, civil rights, women's movements, and so forth, and there you're sitting around thinking about non-existent objects." At Harvard, Cornell

West faced similar conflicts, crystallized for him in the competing values of one particular event mentioned in Selzer's book. Unable to participate in the 1972 student protest and takeover of Massachusetts Hall because he had to complete two foreign-language tests, West instead helped organize outside support for the protesters.

In one of his 2011 essays in *The London Times*, my friend and sometimes collaborator, Marymount University philosophy professor Michael Boylan, who is a white novelist and poet, recalled that when he was earning his Ph.D at the University of Chicago, "There were some philosophers at Chicago who encouraged the intersection of fiction and philosophy, including Paul Ricoeur and Arthur Adkins, (but) the general attitude was that I should keep my passion for fiction a secret. Other prominent members of the department advised me to adopt a pen name if I wanted to continue doodling stories. Real philosophers," he was told, "were interested only in making claims through the analysis of language, logic, and science."

In 1953, the Yale professor Brand Blanshard eloquently broached the issue of the public's general misconception of philosophers in his Adamson Lecture at Manchester University, which became a lovely little book entitled *On Philosophical Style*. "Philosophizing proper," he wrote,

Is a purely intellectual enterprise. Its business is to analyze fundamental assumptions, such as that all events have causes; and to fit the conclusions together in a coherent view of nature and man's place in it. [It] is pledged to discuss these issues with scientific detachment and dispassionateness. ... Philosophy is not an attempt to excite or entertain; is not airing of one's prejudices – the philosopher is supposed to have no prejudices; it is not an attempt to tell a story, or paint a picture, or to get anyone to do anything, or to make anyone like this and dislike that.

But then shortly after this statement Blanchard acknowledged, "Philosophy, while an impersonal subject, is thought and written by persons. The brains of these persons, when they think, are not dynamos humming in a vacuum; actual thought is always bathed in personal feeling, invested with the lights and shades of an individual temperament."

Some philosophers have seen feeling and the techniques of literary craftsmanship as being unrigorous, and perhaps even dangerous. Using concrete examples or empirical content, said Blanchard, can be risky because concrete things are complex, and if you offer one as an example, you might pick out the wrong point in it. Kant was so convinced this would happen that, for the most part, he deliberately avoided using illustrations. And in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, he wrote that "to be subject to emotions and passions is probably always an illness of mind because both emotion and passion exclude the sovereignty of reason."

When I was a graduate student I often felt that analytic philosophy was the place where the heart goes to die. As a professional artist since my teens, I naturally came down on what we might call the literary side of philosophy. That side has a long, venerable history stretching back to Plato's use of dialogue, a dramatic form of expression. In his *Notebooks* (1935–42), Albert Camus, who earned in 1936 his *diplôme d'études supérieures* (an equivalent of our master's degree in philosophy) notoriously said that "feelings and images multiply a philosophy by ten. People can only think in images. If you want to be a philosopher, write novels." That insight is not dissimilar from Martha Nussbaum's observation in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* when she informs us that "we have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial." My own mentor, writer John Gardner, taught that plot (the causal relations between events in fiction, as E.M. Forster explained in *Aspects of the Novel*) is the storyteller's equivalent to the philosopher's argument.

Unlike Americans, Camus worked in a culture where its intellectuals had long appreciated the intimate relationship in what I have often called the sisterhood of philosophy and literature. On the Continent, that interplay between art and ideas dates back to the first modern philosopher, Descartes, who chose a first-person, literary

or narrative approach (with a very compelling story conflict) for his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. He hoped to render that work more assessable to readers, specifically to women, and in that endeavor he was unusually successful, for Queen Christina sent a warship to bring him to Sweden so he could teach her philosophy at the dreadful hour of five in the morning, as I dramatized in my short story “The Queen and the Philosopher.”

Literary scholar Irwin Edman was equally convinced of this age-old connection between the novel of ideas and philosophy. In *Arts and the Man: A Short Introduction to Aesthetics*, he wrote:

The novelist is, in one sense, your true philosopher. For any marshaling of people into a story implies a conception of fate and philosophy of nature. The least obviously philosophical of novelists, in the choice he makes of events, in the construction he makes of circumstances, indicates and implies what the world, his world, is like. Where novelists, like some of those in our own day, Hardy and Anatole France and Thomas Mann, are philosophers, they are so in a more rich and living sense than the philosophers of the academy. They imply themselves or express through their characters a total appraisal of existence. They document their estimates with the whole panorama of human experience. They not only judge but create a world. It is difficult to find in current philosophy a universe more complete and comprehensive than that of a novelist whose mind has ranged over eternity and whose eyes and imagination have traveled widely in time.

Eventually we come to understand that philosophers are not just thinkers with brains humming in a vacuum divorced from the world; they are also writers. And our finest storytellers, the ones who liberate our perceptions of the world, and offer wisdom, are not just writers; they, too, are engaged in the “adventures of ideas,” to borrow a phrase from Alfred North Whitehead. With such an aboriginal connection between philosophy *as* the love of wisdom and literary art, one predating the approach of analytic philosophy at American universities by two millennia, it comes as no surprise the expressions of philosophy can be found in many literary forms. They range across Plato’s dialogues, Nietzsche’s aphorisms, Montaigne’s essays, Schopenhauer’s “Parable of the Porcupines,” Sartre’s novels and plays, Aesop’s fables, the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., Buddhist sūtras, the poetry of Jean Toomer in *Essentials*, Japanese tales of Zen masters, the slokas (verses) of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and wisdom books of the Bible (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes). In principle, then, there is no literary form that cannot be the capacious vehicle for robust philosophical exploration.

As an academically trained philosopher, a storyteller, and a practicing Buddhist who took vows in the Soto Zen tradition, I was naturally drawn to philosophy’s literary side, and phenomenology. I have always seen the literary as a potential site for philosophical agency and I have never seen ideas as existing in some abstract realm floating high above human experience. Rather, I see ideas as originating in the historical muck and mud of our daily lives, cloaked in the immediate particulars of this world, and only later do we abstract them for the purpose of study and reflection. So what does this philosophical novelist do? I simply try to return those ideas to the palpable world of experience from which they first sprang. This approach is not different from what Hillary Putnam suggested in his 1978 book, *Meaning and the Moral Science*, where he said, “the novel aids us in the imaginative recreation of moral perplexities, in the widest sense.” If philosophy is direct discourse, then fiction, as Michael Boylan has long argued, can be seen not as frivolous play or mere escapist entertainment, but possibly as a form of indirect discourse that makes claims or judgments about this world and how it works.

And how well is our world working? These have been difficult years – 2020 and 2021 – for all of us. We have endured, and continue to muddle through, crises thick and threefold. Layers of suffering that include an on-going, mutating, global coronavirus pandemic that has, at the time of this writing, caused over 500,000 deaths in America alone. Added to which, we have endured a contentious presidential election that has divided

Americans in ways we have not seen since the 1960s and perhaps the Civil War, leading to an assault on the nation's Capital on January 6th, which resulted in five deaths. And death for black Americans at the hands of police officers emerged as the central theme of a Black Lives Matter movement triggered by the killings of George Floyd and others, that drew international attention to centuries of racism and inequality in the United States and around the world.

Yet pandemics, racism, and political corruption are not new to human experience. Deaths, plagues, impermanence, and social conflicts have been with us in the past. We can expect such experiences in the future, and our philosophers, in the West and East, have rightly seen it as their responsibility to bring – in the name of wisdom – clarity to these painful but inevitable episodes so that we might understand them better, heal, adapt, and gain the courage to live, grow, and prosper. This is one way philosophers are empowered to have a positive impact on the enveloping culture. Just now I am thinking of those of us engaged in the task of interpreting Buddhism for an American audience during these troubled times.

Like Plato's belief that philosophy is a preparation for death in the *Phaedo*, Buddhist practitioners reflect daily, even every moment, on the certainty of death and the impermanence of all things, which includes the thoughts and feelings that moment by moment arise and pass away in consciousness. The question of "*How shall I live?*" is ever present for practitioners who embrace the Eightfold Path, and the vows of a lay Buddhist, an *upasaka*, called the Precepts. It is an intellectual and spiritual orientation fully concerned with the maxims at the Temple of Apollo – doing nothing to excess (the Buddha's Middle Way), maintaining epistemological humility (or Right View in the Eightfold Path) and, most important of all, investigating the nature of what we call the self and identity. That fundamental interrogation alone would do much to deconstruct and dissolve racism, sexism, and many other negative, damaging attitudes that I could name.

The "examined life" could not be more examined for Dharma followers who *live* philosophy every day by practicing *vipassana* or "insight meditation," a technique that removes what teacher Bhikkhu Bodhi once described as the "layers of conceptual paint," or social conditioning, presuppositions, and prejudices that obscure our direct experience of phenomenon, *here* and *now*, in a method or practice thousands of years older than the phenomenological *epoché* of Edmund Husserl.

It is difficult to escape in literature, movies, television programs, graphic novels, and even T-shirts, aspects of this very visible philosophy in American culture. And, its presence is growing significantly in black American communities, one of those "laboring, underclass and unschooled settings," thanks to teachers such as Jan Willis, angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Choyin Rangdrol, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, Ruth King, many others and, I guess I should humbly add, philosophical literary artists like myself. These teachers are philosophers as much as Diogenes and Lao Tzu and work – in Socrates's (or Plato's) sense of the midwife – during this hour rife with political and racial pain to nurture the evolution of black *and* American culture (for black culture *is* American culture). Such work raises and grapples with perennial questions of ethics, ontology, and epistemology in a spirit that transcends all forms of dualism, them vs. us, including the illusory divide between East and West, and is expressed beautifully in Dogen's insight that, "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between oneself and others." Naturally, this wisdom will inevitably be expressed in art, as when in his timeless poem, Bunan observes that,

*The moon's the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were.
Yet I've become the thingness
Of all the things I see.*