PHILOSOPHY, CHILDREN AND THE CULTURE OF RATIONALITY

or

Even Though "Philosophy Bakes No Bread"
It Can Still Make a Role for Itself

Having been involved with the Philosophy For Children program for several years now as a philosopher/teacher trainer, I often have had the occasion to reflect upon my experience. While conducting "Philosophy for Children" workshops, I have discovered that one of the great joys of that process has been the way in which teachers have so often responded to the material. It has come as quite a surprise to me that after some initial hesitance, the teachers become enthusiastically involved in the dialogues which take place in the workshop process. Perhaps this shouldn't surprise me, but it does. I have even found it somewhat confusing because, as a philosopher, I am used to the idea of being thought esoteric, divorced from reality and not really concerned with matters of everyday importance. But here is a case in which others, too, are discovering that it is not only permissible to talk about philosophical ideas, but actually encouraged. It was a surprise to me to discover that people *do* want to think about philosophical ideas.

So why, in general, do not people talk philosophy seriously? The problem has been threefold: First, philosophizing seems to be a kind of "closet" activity. People do it but nobody wants to be heard doing it. Why is this the case? The answer, I believe, has partially to do with the second part of the problem. As children, we are not given the opportunity to think philosophically and in many cases are actively discouraged from doing so. Even as adults, we are not told that it is all right to speculate about such matters. As a result, as adults, we do not know how to go about it and hence, are unsure of themselves. Nobody ever told us that you can talk about philosophical ideas in a methodical and reasonable way; or that it is not the particular answer that you come up with (if any) that is important, but how *reasonable* that answer is that counts.

The third part of the problem has to do with philosophy itself and that is what the body of this paper is really concerned with. What is the proper relation between philosophy, training in philosophy, and our cultural heritage? I am convinced that philosophy is a discipline which can meet real needs in genuine and effective ways. It is something our society *needs* in this "age of anxiety". A sustained loss of philosophical consciousness would be more than just the loss of an esoteric, impractical and useless activity. Its loss could mean the loss of the rational foundations upon which our society depends.

But, is philosophy in danger of being lost? The answer is both yes and no. In order to understand that answer we need to start with a consideration of the current state of philosophy. Consider the philosophers. Above all professionals, they least know why they are, what they are or what they are good for. Not only is their discipline, and hence their *raison d'etre,* under constant attack by the forces of economic pragmatism and the frenzy of technology, but, being a questioning activity, they have, in recent years, often turned their dialectical method upon philosophy itself. It takes a stout heart and a kind of single-mindedness of purpose to exist as a philosopher. Of course the power of tradition has, to some degree, sheltered philosophy (and some philosophers) from external threats by permitting some lucky ones to find protection in institutions where the value of philosophy is taken for granted by the institution itself and colleagues in other departments – even if neither actually understands what philosophers actually do or why they are in fact valuable. But this protecting influence has not been entirely successful in preventing philosophers from turning their critical weapons against themselves. Philosophers seem to be the only ones to have taken seriously Camus' opening statement in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide".

The Great War and its aftermath gave people a great sense of abandonment in the world, of being cut free from one's moorings, of the destruction and loss of the known world and the need to reconstruct a new one. Thus, we find at this time the phenomenon of Dadaism: an attempt by art to overcome itself. This anti-art art has its counterpart in the anti-philosophy of the same time. For example, for all of their differences, the philosophical writings of such thinkers as Wittgenstein and Heidegger, not to mention the logical positivists and linguistic analysts, shared the fundamental task of ridding philosophy of its past mistakes (in some cases by ridding it of its past *per se*). These thinkers expended a good deal of their not inconsiderable philosophical talents and energies attempting to eliminate philosophy. The difference between dadaism in art and this "dadaist" philosophy is that art's attempted self-overcoming served as a corrective to art itself: out of it grew a new art for a new age. The dadaist trend in philosophy has yet to spend itself – if anything it is becoming increasingly effective with the likes of Derrida and Rorty. But philosophy, it would seem, can only be destroyed by

philosophy (no non-philosopher ceases to encounter the "perennial questions of philosophy" – they just no longer have philosophers to help them). This is the paradox of modern philosophy: that only philosophers can destroy philosophy. But, like the Phoenix, philosophy will reconstitute itself in the very process of its own destruction.

Why is this the case? Simply because philosophy is a natural (if an often unwanted or unfortunate) human tendency. Philosophy, as Aristotle said, begins in wonder. But this wonder that is the well-spring of philosophy is a primordial wonder, not that derivative form of wonder we find in the pure and applied sciences – or in practical activity of all kinds. It is primordial because, unlike these other forms of wonder, it does not presuppose being, existence, meaning or value – presuppositions without which these other wonderful activities would be unthinkable. Indeed, these fundamental concepts form the very substance of the activity of philosophy itself – they are the foundation of those "perennial questions of philosophy" which we humans *qua* humans never cease to encounter.

Attempting to train oneself – or more accurately one's epoch – to do without philosophy is like the man who tried to train his dog to get along without food: "the damn dog," he complained, "just never seemed to get the hang of it." But, just as we must recognize that the dog must eat, so too must we recognize that he may eat well or badly – and the effect of doing one rather than the other will be profound. Likewise with philosophy. We, as a people, have not been doing philosophy well lately and the effects have been profound. We have not been doing it well in part because we have been coming to it much too late – I can point to the inability of most of our college students to comprehend the most basic forms of philosophical argument as evidence for the truth of this statement. Yet *philosophy will be done.* The only question is whether it will be done well or badly. In our culture, philosophy that is done well is philosophy that is done by reasoning. Those who do not learn to reason will do philosophy without reason: and then indeed philosophy as *we* have known it will be extinguished. Thus, we see our people, especially our young people, flocking toward drugs, cults, mysticisms and mythologies because these give some vague promise of providing what, in essence, is philosophical content without the necessity of having to approach it philosophically (which they do not know how to do anyway). In other words, they get philosophy without the need to learn to do philosophy in a way that will provide proper and lasting nourishment – without what Hegel called "the labor of the concept".

These sorts of alternatives to rational philosophy may not be so bad if we do not wish to be a culture based on reason. Philosophy is a broad and vague concept but philosophy as we know it is a rational activity which is the highest expression of our belief in ourselves and our culture as essentially rational. If Hegel is right that philosophy is but an expression of its times then heretofore our culture has shown itself to be based on reason because its philosophy has been based on reason. If, on the other hand, the way we as a people do our philosophizing is a determinant of the way our culture is based, then our culture is in danger of losing is rational grounding.

This is true not because "philosophers" (i.e. professional academics) do not use reason – if anything they are too rational. But this type of philosophy is too divorced from real human life and real human concerns. Philosophy, as traditionally understood, has two components: its content and its method. The content, the wisdom which is the object of its love, concerns human existence itself and those fundamental aspects which give it meaning and significance. Its method, in Western culture, is the application of reason. Unfortunately, the contemporary age has seen the steady alienation of these two aspects of philosophy. Academic philosophers have drawn further and further away from taking the "perennial questions" of philosophy seriously while putting their energies toward refining the method. In society as a whole, there is a sense of loss of meaning and a longing to find it. This longing is in essence an interest in the content of philosophy as traditionally understood. Unfortunately, we find ourselves less and less able to deal with it using the traditional method of reasoning.

Nevertheless, we still consider ourselves to be a society based upon reason. The rational foundations of Western Culture lies deep within us. Yet, though we still profess this rationality we hear voices which denounce this very rationality. But a society that professes to be rational requires a rational expression of its *Weltanschauung.* If a society does not profess to be grounded in the rational, then it has no need of a philosophy which is grounded in reason. An aesthetic consciousness, for example, requires myth; an otherworldly consciousness requires religion; an unhappy consciousness wants mysticism or drugs. Perhaps all people require all of these to some degree but place more or less emphasis on one or the other. Our society ostensibly places a greater emphasis on the rational element and hence we call ourselves a rational people. Those who would condemn reason are those who cannot distinguish between reasoning and rationalizing. They see that reasoning can be turned toward unreasonable ends. What they fail to see, of course, is that such reasoning is generally fallacious. In fact, it is the lack of *good* reasoning that they are really condemning, not the rational foundations of society itself. We need not forsake our heritage. We

are a society founded upon rationality and that is our strength.

If we profess to be a culture based upon rationality, then we require philosophy to be for us as our tradition has known it. We thus require a people who are encouraged to think philosophically, both in content and in method. Only such a philosophical consciousness can support a rational *Weltanschauung.* The disappearance of philosophy from our early curriculum – not to mention our early social experience – can only result in a non-rational world view. This in itself is not a problem; it is only a problem if one believes that the culture of rationality ought to be preserved. Given that assumption, we must recognize that training in philosophy is as important to the later manifestation of rationality in the individual as training in religion is to the later emergence of religious belief in the individual. It is no accident that religions put great emphasis in bringing children up in the faith. They recognize that early religious training is the only reliable way of creating a religious consciousness and of preserving religious belief. Should our society do any less with its belief that it is good to be reasonable?

Insofar as the play of children is but preparation for the work of adulthood, early childhood activity is preparation for adult activity; and, insofar as adult activity ought to be rational, childhood activity must be directed toward that end. If our culture presupposes the ability to think rationally, then education and training must reflect that way of thinking and of forming beliefs.

Philosophy is a striving to make sense out of the world and to create meaning in it. For this reason, philosophy is preeminently a child's activity. In this way, philosophers are much like athletes – they have brought their childhood pleasures with them into their adult lives. In saying this, I am reminded of the admonition in Matthew 18:3:

> *Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.*

Can we enter the Kingdom of Reason if we do not, "suffer the little children to come unto us", recognizing in what way we share the wonderment of the child? And how are we to become as little children – to recapture that wonder and excitement which makes childhood so captivating to observe – if part of the essence of childhood, that very primordial wondering, is extinguished before it has a chance to emerge into the conscious life of the adult?

In the minds of many members of the general public – especially the pragmatic business community, but not excluding others (even academics) – the word "philosophy" rings some bells which are not always of the melodious sort. This is, no doubt, even more true in such times as these with its economic uncertainty and social problems. There are probably some good reasons for some of this dissonance. When times are getting tough, anything which does not vibrate in sympathy with immediate needs cannot be given the hearing that one might like or that it might deserve. The defense of philosophy as a purely esoteric activity taking place in some ivory tower collegiate setting far removed from the immediate needs of the day is not the present issue, though I do believe that some good defense could be made of even that aspect of philosophy. But not all of philosophy should be perceived in this way, anymore than the abstruse subjects of pure math are to be equated with the obvious needs we all have of being able to balance our check books and make change. Philosophy, too, has its practical side which meets real needs in real worlds. I am sure that this statement will be met with some scepticism – perhaps not least by professional philosophers themselves. After all, it might be reasoned, we have done pretty well up to now without making philosophy part of our lives, why should we think that it is necessary or important to start now? If it is merely to give our souls some sustenance then, perhaps, we should wait until we can properly nourish the body in the manner we would like first. In fact, it may very well be the case that part of the reason we have some of the serious problems we have in our society as well in our personal lives is that we, as a people, have lost those valuable skills which are developed in the activity of philosophizing.

I am here reminded of a poem entitled "Explained" in the book *Now We are Six* by A. A. Milne, creator of *Winnie the Pooh.* In his sensitive and perceptive way, Milne captures the plight of a child with philosophical problems that need answering.

EXPLAINED

Elizabeth Ann
Said to her Nan:
"Please will you tell me how God began?
Somebody must have made Him. So
Who could it be, 'cos I want to know?"
And Nurse said *"Well?"*
And Ann said, "Well?
I know you know, and I wish you'd tell."
And Nurse took pins from her mouth, and said,
"Now then, darling, it's time for bed."

Elizabeth Ann
Had a wonderful plan:
She would run round the world till she found a man
Who knew *exactly* how God began.
She got up early, she dressed, and ran
Trying to find an Important Man.
She ran to London and knocked at the door
Of the Lord High Doodeldum's coach-and-four.
"Please, sir (if there's anyone in),
However-and-ever did God begin?"

But out the window, large and red,
Came the Lord High Coachman's face instead.
And the Lord High Coachman laughed and said:
"Well, what put *that* in your quaint little head?"

Elizabeth Ann went home again
and took from the ottoman Jenniferjane.
"Jenniferjane," said Elizabeth Ann,
"Tell me *at once* how God began."
And Jane, who didn't much care for speaking,
Replied in her usual way by squeaking.

What did it mean? Well, to be quite candid,
I don't know, but Elizabeth Ann did.
Elizabeth Ann said softly, "Oh!
Thank you, Jennifer, now I know."

Elizabeth Ann is probably typical. Getting no satisfaction from those adults who she felt ought to know the answer to her perplexity she could only at last turn toward her doll to end her disquiet with at least the pretense of having found the answer. How long will Elizabeth Ann persist in seeking to find a means of *genuinely* answering such questions? It will probably not be long before her questioning ceases as she learns that the response is one of patronizing dismissal rather than a spirit of encouragement. How long, then, before the wonder which gives rise to the questions also disappears? How, then, will she learn to think well about these and other problems she may and will encounter throughout life – adult life as well as childhood? How much better it would have been had her spirit of wonder been directed in a constructive way so that such questions would be perceived as challenges to her ingenuity and tests of her growing ability to think rationally about difficult and complex problems.

How truly real does this story ring in our own experience? Does it matter that this is the way children are treated when they ask difficult "philosophical" questions? I think that it does matter and that it matters in a way which gets at the root of what is missing from an education that does not include within it disciplined, cooperative and meaningful explorations of wonderful thoughts.

In order to find out what was missing, let us look first at what Elizabeth Ann may have been seeking outside of the obvious question of "where did God come from?" When a child wonders about things – anything – they are exercising not only their questioning faculties but may other faculties as well. Ah! but they are such ridiculous questions – not *good* questions like where do babies come from or things of that sort. But a child's play may be ridiculous too – like making a house out of a blanket and a chair when there is a perfectly good complete doll's house sitting unused in their room; and yet we understand that this exercise of imagination, this manipulation of familiar objects in new ways, this preference for objects of their own production are far from ridiculous but are quite the contrary; they are the building blocks of traits which create productive, imaginative, resourceful adults. In the same way, I believe, the so-called ridiculous questions of children such as those of Elizabeth Ann, are exercises of their critical faculties – or at least are potentially so. Effective critical evaluation begins with questioning – and not just the easy and obvious questions, not just the questions we would like to hear because we are more comfortable with them and we know something about how to go about answering them. True critical faculties are honed on the fine stone of philosophy.

But critical questioning is only one-half of the step in critical thinking. Once the questions are posed, it is not sufficient to leave it at that and go to bed as if the answers where to arise overnight from a sort of spontaneous generation. The next crucial step must be the formulation of a response to the question which satisfies the questioner emotionally and intellectually. How can the child ever learn to make these critical evaluations, to distinguish a satisfactory answer from an unsatisfactory one if the adult response to such intellectual "play" is to discourage asking the questions in the first place or to show by their actions that attempting to seek answers to them is not worth the time and effort needed? Can we realistically expect that as adults they will have developed a facility to make the effort to know how to penetrate into a problem to discover its complexities, its significance and its possible solutions, if the very "playful" activities they engaged in as children, and which serve to develop these skills, were left to wither before they could flower? How much better we all would be if these abilities flourished among as many members of our society who today can balance a check book or make change.

What are children looking for when they ask, "who am I", "where did I come from?", "if I had different

parents would I still be me?" and similar kinds of things? Is this just another bunch of ridiculous questions? By now you may suspect that I do not think so. In asking such questions the child is seeking some understanding of his/her own identity – who they are in relation to everything else and particularly in relation to other people. Of course they are who they are and no one else – "but what makes me, me?," they persist in asking. This very profound and primordial seeking to know themselves is the root of a great many important insights; not the least of which is the attempt to discover the nature and limits of the self and, having discovered them, finding their unification, their identity, within that self same person they call "me". To what extent am I, and am I not my father, my mother, my teacher, my arm or leg, my body, my thoughts, my feelings, or whatever (it is always sad to see a student who consistently identifies themselves as a "c" person or an "a" person. And what a confusion of identity they have when a "c" person receives an "a" or *vice-versa.*) The discovery of the limits of the self enables a discovery of that which uniquely identifies this self. This in turn leads to the integration of the self. It seems to me no accident that we call a morally upright individual a person with great integrity. It signifies our recognition that they are secure in the knowledge of who they are – that they do not rely on the being of others for their identity, nor do they depend upon others for their ideas. By discovering the integrity of the self they have also discovered the *necessity* to think for themselves. As children learn to distinguish themselves from others – from their fathers and mothers – so they learn to distinguish their own thinking from the thinking of others; they learn to think for themselves. It is the discipline of philosophy in which appeals to authorities are anathema and for which the idea is alien that there are always definite "correct" answers to philosophical problems to be found. That is why philosophical speculation is the pre-eminent means of developing a sense of self-identity, self-worth and intellectual self-reliance. If there are no "correct" answers then there is nobody one can go to to get them; one must find them for oneself; one must think rationally and think well for oneself. The development of the skills of critical thinking are inseparable from the skills of thinking for oneself. I have tried to show how both are intrinsically bound up with the skills which are fostered by the elementary activity of philosophizing.

In conclusion, the real, tangible benefits of philosophy are to be found, not just in a select, highly educated few, but in the capacity of people in general to form themselves into a social order founded upon a real ability to reason about difficult ideas and problems. This is something we need, not just in economic good times, but even more crucially in difficult times. Failure to recognize this is tantamount to the decision to find another basis for our society – a basis in which rational decision-making is relegated to a few and the rational tenor of our culture will sing in vain to a tone-deaf society. The attempt to kill philosophy – either legislatively or suicidally cannot succeed because the philosophical urge is basic to human existence. Philosophy as we know it, philosophy as critical reasoning, may die; it may perish of neglect or slip into oblivion. This rational philosophy may well perish, but as it perishes, so perishes a way of life and a culture; for the need to do philosophy does not perish – only the capacity to do it well does. If we decide that our cultural ideal of problem-solving through reason is worth preserving then we must recognize that as the child plays, so the adult lives – and we must act accordingly.

John C. Thomas