

## WOMEN AND CHILDREN AND THE EVOLUTION OF PHILOSOPHY

As I was thinking about what I would say to you tonight, I remembered myself in my freshman year at a Catholic girls high school. It was Spring and the nuns had told us that we would have a five-day retreat. Speakers (priests) would come to speak to us in the mornings and the afternoons would be reserved for reflection and reading. Of course, it was to be a silent retreat. No talking for five days.

My classmates weren't very happy about the prospect. Five days of listening to some priest, reading and silence. But I remember being thrilled. I had never had such an experience.

"Each girl is to bring in a book that you will read and think about in the afternoons," Sister said. "Not all books will be approved. It must be a book of some substance."

And she looked at us with that stare of hers as if to say "you know what I mean!"

I remember going to the school library, a very small room and asking the nun in charge for "a book of substance." She pointed to the theology section and said, "Anything from those shelves will do."

My eye scanned the titles and caught a red book with gold letters. The Confessions of St. Augustine. I had been going to confession now for five years. Sin was something I thought about a lot (since I was a kind of neurotic pre-adolescent.) "It would be interesting to hear about other people's sins," I thought to myself "and what they think about going to confession." And I checked out the book.

Sister Mary Jeremiah, who was not only my home room teacher but my algebra teacher (and I might add "my hero" at the time) looked at me very intently when I submitted my book for approval on a Friday morning.

"Heavy reading," she commented. And then, "Go to it Ann!"

I don't remember understanding anything of what I read for the next five afternoons, but I do remember reading greedily. I knew nothing about St. Augustine.

"Here was a man who lived," I thought to myself. As I look back today, I realize that I had no idea of the purpose of the book. Actually, St. Augustine is very clear about why he wrote The Confessions: "That I myself and whoever else reads them may realize from what depths we must cry unto God." Somehow the young adolescent missed the point.

There was a time set aside between 2:00 and 2:30 in the afternoon to talk to one's spiritual advisor during the retreat. Sister Mary Jeremiah was my advisor. A big, fair-skinned woman, she spoke with a strong Brooklyn accent and had a habit of grinding her teeth when she became annoyed. This happened quite often. One day she kicked her chair right across our classroom in a frenzy. She was my hero. We used to clean chapel together in the afternoons. Just she and I. And we'd talk.

"Sister, who is this St. Augustine."

"A philosopher," she said. "A great thinker. A Father of the Church." And she told me the story of St. Monica, Augustine's early life and his decision to become a priest, and later his appointment as Bishop of Hippo.

"I'd like to be one of those," I said.

"It's not for girls, Ann. Only boys become philosophers. Only boys become priests."

"Your're a woman and you teach math." I said. (I had also thought I might want to become a math professor.)

"I teach math. That's not the same thing as being a mathematician. And you might be able to teach philosophy, but women don't become philosophers."

Later, at a Catholic liberal arts college run by Ursuline nuns at which everyone took 24 credits in philosophy whether they liked it or not, I met my first woman philosophy teacher. A short, dark, dynamic nun with green eyes, she taught Introduction to

Philosophy first semester, and Aristotelian logic the second semester of Freshman year. Now she became my hero. Her courses were my favorite courses and I remember coming home on weekends and telling my brother everything I could remember that she had told us. Sophomore, Junior and Senior year was also filled with philosophy, but these courses were always taught by men. I understood little of the Thomistic babble but caught the spirit of the quest. I remember one teacher in particular who appeared to be talking to himself rather than to the class as he would pace up and down and look out the window, often using terms that no one understood. But for some odd reason, I loved going to philosophy classes.

I was an exception and I knew it. Most of my housemates (we were 16 living in one small, red brick house with a Mother nun) hated philosophy classes and would panic before the examinations. I remember their asking me to review the material with them the afternoon and evening before the midterm and the final, and my struggling to make sense of the textbooks for them as we met in the third floor bathroom where we could sneak a cigarette. Most of what I told them was probably all wrong, but when you know your friends are counting on you, you try. Once in a while, one of my housemates would counter my interpretation and dialogue would begin. But this was very rare. How we ever passed those courses, I have no idea! Later, before we graduated, we had to write a short thesis, explicating our own philosophy. I remember being called to the Castle (the residence of the religious faculty) to talk to a Review Committee. As I entered the massive, high-ceiling room and surveyed the semi-circle of eight nuns sitting around a thick, antique mahogany conference table, I felt very small and insignificant.

"Ann, have a seat," Mother Superior said to me, indicating a chair at the far end of the table. "We've all read your thesis and find it very different. I might say very original." Mother seemed to be searching carefully for her words. "What we would like to know is where you learned these things? Was it in the philosophy courses you took here at the College?"

"Yes and no, Mother," I responded. "Lovejoy's Great Chain of Being did make a strong impression on me. And I always liked going to philosophy class, even though I rarely understood very much. My essay is an attempt to record what I think about such issues as the nature of freedom, persons, time and the role of love in human life."

"Oh," Mother said, looking in a knowing way at her colleagues seated rigidly around the table. "Well, I guess you realize it is not very orthodox."

"No, I didn't realize that, Mother. To tell you the truth, I never thought about it. I didn't even consider Catholic dogma as a criterion for this philosophical essay."

"It isn't dear. It isn't."

We did have three very good students in our class who often asked the male professors the most wonderful questions. But they weren't in our dormitory, or they, rather than I, would have been helping the others prepare for exams. They were day students. One day one of them, the most brilliant, asked our professor (whom I found almost unintelligible), "Could a woman go on and do a graduate degree in philosophy?"

"I doubt it," he responded quickly, "and I certainly wouldn't advise you to try it."

"That was that," I thought to myself. "Betty is so much better in philosophy than I. What chance would I ever have."

Senior year was very special. A Father Deonard was to come from the University of Louvain and teach us an elective course on Karl Jaspers. A tall, handsome man in white flowing Dominican robes, he appeared on campus in September and introduced himself and his course to the student body.

"You're all welcome," he said in his wonderful accent. "Philosophy is the birthright of each of you. I won't teach you anything, but you could gain a great deal. Hopefully, by the end of the course, we'll all realize how much we don't know."

"Isn't he great?" I whispered to my roommate. "Let's get up early and register first thing after breakfast," I added.

"Not for me" she responded. "I already know I don't know anything about philosophy, and I don't need him telling me about it for another year."

I took the course anyway. And I enjoyed every minute of it. Nearing graduation, I ventured the question again. "Father, do you think we here could do philosophy in graduate school?"

I could tell he was thinking very hard because he took a long time to answer and his brow took on many wrinkles. "I wouldn't advise it for any of you as a professional choice," he said very slowly. "But that's not to say that you couldn't or shouldn't continue to read philosophy and think about the philosophical dimension of your own experience. And there is no reason why you shouldn't come together with your friends to talk about these issues on an informal basis."

"That was that," I thought to myself for the second time.

The very same year, I had studied with a little French priest from the Sorbonne. We had concentrated on the Fourth Gospel of St. John, one of my favorite works. Two nights before our last class in philosophy at the college, he gave a small party at his residence for the seniors. I remember he ordered a case of French champagne for the occasion. When I entered the living room, he proposed a toast to me, "To the young woman who wrote the most marvelous commentary on the Fourth Gospel."

I was thrilled. Here was this expert who knew so much about philosophy as well as theology telling me that I had done a good job.

"Perhaps I should get his opinion about going on in philosophy," I said to myself.

The party was quite joyous and Father was the person everyone wanted to speak to that evening. So it took me a while to get near him.

"Father, what would you think about my going on in philosophy?" I ventured.

"Not a good idea, Ann. You're good, quite good, but let's face it, you're a woman. And philosophy is a man's discipline."

"Maybe I'm not good enough."

"That's not it. You're better than some of the men that go into the field."

"What about theology?"

"The same, my child," he said, lowering his head and shaking it from side to side at the same time.

I was numb. Even though the priest hadn't said anything that I didn't expect, his very saying it shocked me. It seemed to me that he didn't see any contradiction in what he was saying at all. As a matter of fact, he followed his remarks by, "Now let's not get too serious tonight. Let's have some more champagne and enjoy ourselves. You've been such a source of joy for me this semester." And then he put his arm around me in a comforting manner. And I was sure he cared for me very much.

But all I could think of at the time were six words: "In the beginning was the Word." Obviously, he thought his Word was only for certain people.

And what was that Word?

There are those who have thought it was truth. And others have thought it was meaning, meaning that could make a significant difference in the quality of our every day lives and how we relate to each other and the rest of the natural world. But one thing is certain: The Word is not restricted to white males! It's for all people. That includes blacks, Chinese, Indians, women and children. If philosophy is a quest for truth and/or meaning, then all women and children ought to have the same opportunity to do philosophy, do it well, and, if they so desire, make it the center of their professional lives.

That option wasn't open to me. So I chose intellectual history (at least at first). It was the closest I could get. That was 1963. Since then I've had a few more heroes--all of

them women--Margaret Fuller, Simone Weil, Emma Goldman and Katherine Hepburn. Not one of them was a professional philosopher, with the exception of Weil who took a degree in philosophy and did teach for a while at a lycee in France. (Maybe the French priest thought of her as a modern day Joan of Arc, a saint, rather than a woman). All four of these women were people who lived philosophy and made a significant difference in the world. They were good models for someone, who, in 1973, saw a possibility of bringing philosophy to the children of the world in such a way that the silencing and exclusion that I experienced regarding philosophy could possibly become a thing of the past.

When I say philosophy, I mean a quest for self-knowledge or better yet, a love of wisdom. It entails good questioning, paying attention to the details of one's experience, dialogue with others, open inquiry, recognition of your own ignorance and a willingness to follow the inquiry where it leads. Such a process is sometimes called participating in a community of inquiry. It involves the child in a growing commitment to careful deliberation with others, living a life that is judicious, searching and honest. It also involves a care for the procedures of inquiry, other persons and all of the natural environment.

In the last twenty years, we have seen the development of at least three intellectual movements, black philosophy, women's philosophy and Philosophy for Children that aim to make unheard voices heard, to give sectors of the population encouragement and a space to speak their own word, to participate in the on-going conversation that is their birthright. (And one might add that a fourth movement, animal rights philosophy, is an attempt on our part to voice the concerns of animals for them, to bring their interests and perspectives into the conversation.)

Michael Oakshott, hardly a proponent of any of these movements, characterized the situation eloquently:

We are all inheritors neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world nor an accumulating body of knowledge but of a conversation begun in primeval forest and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation that goes on both in public and within each of ourselves. Of course, there is argument and inquiry and information, but wherever these are profitable, they are recognized as passages in this conversation. Education, properly speaking then is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation . . . in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to the conversation. And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.

But what if there are voices that are never heard, Mr. Oakshott? When they claim the right to be heard and the time is right, and they finally succeed in their fight to be heard, they'll be part of the conversation, he would respond.

The Hegelian faith that guides the Mr. Oakshotts of the world makes me very angry, because philosophy then becomes a tool to justify the status-quo. It was Paulo Freire, at the other end of the political spectrum, who urged all oppressed people to make their voices heard, to create the conditions that would make it possible for them to take part in the conversation. In his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he describes poignantly what it is to belong to a 'culture of silence.' Children belong to such a culture. Women belong to such a culture. Often alcoholics and drug addicts belong to this culture. Such individual's view themselves as impotent. They keep their eyes down when the powerful walk by. They don't look you straight in the eye. They know they are outside the real conversation, the conversation that matters. Cut off from the flow of ideas, hopes and

dreams of those in power, the oppressed are powerless to question the assumptions or have a role in defining the concepts that affect their daily lives.

Feminist philosophy and children's philosophy were phenomena of the 1960's. One could argue that our readiness now to listen to the voices of children doing philosophy has been prepared by feminist philosophy. This is not to detract from the originality of children's philosophy or to say that it is merely the consequence of the work of mothers. If we look at the history of both movements, we discover that they developed concurrently. Today feminist philosophy is more developed, more diversified and more self-critical: not only are many different feminist voices heard defending alternative philosophical positions, but feminists like Jean Grimshaw write books questioning the assumptions of some of the loudest, most influential voices. This is a sign of health.

Children's philosophy is not there yet. On the other hand, it has reached more individuals in the world. It's had more access to the educational establishment where it can make a difference in shaping the attitudes of the next generation. If it is successful in moving into schools of education, into the preparation of future teachers, it will be even more out-reaching. But this will only happen if it does not become one more discipline, one more collection of information for children to master, rather than being presented as a vehicle for expressing their own views of the world, how it is and how it ought to be. But one thing is certain:

Not exposing children to philosophy would be a shame because philosophy perfects what is a natural capacity in people. It's not like teaching them to learn the violin. It's teaching kids to use their own voices.

Feminist philosophy and philosophy for children can be seen as a response to the tensions and contradictions of the sixties. Like the rest of the history of philosophy, these two movements must be understood against a backdrop. In this case, the backdrop was the Vietnamese War, the student movement, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the rise of irrational movements from fringe religious groups to the occult, a back to nature movement and the civil rights movement. If black people could make their voices heard, if black people could do philosophy, perhaps women and children could do the same. Perhaps they could discover what they had to say and make a difference in the way we think about philosophical issues. Perhaps they could raise new problems, problematize issues in new ways and move to the center questions which have till now been on the periphery:

Mothering

Being a child of two people

Sexist language

Acquiring a language

Abortion

The right to live childhood well

Pornography

Children's Television

Violence

The ethics of spanking

**Discrimination**

Compulsory education

**Housework**

Play and The Reality of Toys

**Women and Medicine**

Do Doll Hospitals Do Good?

**Time in the Life of a Woman**

time in the life of a Thumb Sucker

There is a growing consensus among philosophers that much of the history of philosophy would look very different if the perspectives of women had been taken into account. Feminist philosophy has helped us see that. Although they are quite different in many ways, feminist philosophy and philosophy for children share some similarities. Both aim to make unheard voices heard. Both stress the discovery of meaning and the importance of listening to many perspectives in coming to know and understand an issue. Both pay attention not only to the content under discussion, but to the way in which we do philosophy and the epistemological, ethical and political implications of the process. In philosophy for children, the community of inquiry is the pedagogical ideal. In feminist philosophy, something very similar obtains. Stress is on working together, building on each others ideas and encouraging each woman to speak her own word. Both philosophy for children and feminist philosophy see the self as relational and use the narrative as an essential tool in doing philosophy.

I predict that soon professional philosophers will also realize that the history of philosophy could have been even more different if children's perspectives were taken into account. As philosophers begin to listen to what children say as they do philosophy with their peers in the classroom, motives will be generated for developing other curriculum materials, other narratives for facilitating the speaking of children's perspectives. Further, as they listen and respond to children's views, philosophers will begin to reconsider their own positions. The new work by Barry Curtis, Doing Philosophy with Children is an omen of wonderful things to come. But this will only happen if children continue to do philosophy in a rigorous fashion as a regular part of their elementary school experience. To the extent that professional philosophers can help children (males and females) speak their own word, share their philosophical theories, help each other make sense of the world, to that extent they will contribute significantly to the growing comprehensiveness of the philosophical conversation and the evolution of the discipline of philosophy itself.

Ann Margaret Sharp