

Cave Angst

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The relatively recent but intense attention to problems related to teaching philosophy has included much discussion about structures, materials, and optimizing techniques for handling such courses as Introduction to Philosophy and Logic. As philosophers or professionals who teach philosophy, it is well that we have finally recognized the value—even necessity—of sharing among ourselves such information. Academics generally have for too long paid scant attention to the arts of teaching, but philosophers have been particularly remiss. It is probably a prejudice for me to think this, but I cannot help viewing philosophy as an especially complex subject matter, for it not only aspires to transmit a staggeringly inclusive conceptual legacy, but attempts to engender a special approach or attitude toward human experience as well. Furthermore, there is within the tradition itself a fairly influential conviction that philosophy cannot be taught—the pedagogic paradox *par excellence*. So, as I say, it is well, and doubly well, that philosophers have come to talk of these matters.

There is at least one other element peculiar to teaching philosophy which has not yet been addressed much in the current dialogue, but which matters to all of us, both as philosophers and as sensitive teachers. I refer to the impact of what might be called the “paradox of the quest” on large numbers of the earnest young lives which pass through our philosophy courses, particularly courses designated “Introduction to Philosophy” and “Existentialism.” The “paradox of the quest” refers to a range of more or less traumatic confusions and disappointments encountered by students looking for the “meaning of life” when they discover that philosophy offers few universalities or certainties—but insists upon the supreme worth of the search anyway. Often they may encounter statements such as “philosophy is the eternal search for truth, a search which inevitably fails and yet is never defeated; which continually eludes us, but which always guides us.”¹

A young person entering a first course in philosophy may or may not have already begun self-examination in such matters as religion, morality and politics, but is rarely prepared for the bewildering array of arguments and counter-arguments, none with obvious decisiveness, which are brought against every single one of his or her own beliefs. And whether this person has found some temporarily satisfying conceptual *Weltanschauung* or not, it is difficult for even the most able and psychologically secure student to avoid real despair when first coming to grips with challenges as the following from Sartre:

Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities; without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forces for himself on this earth.²

We teachers of philosophy know very well that our students undergo a variety of disturbing doubts, anxieties and frustrations. Yet, I am afraid we tend to ignore the situation or to shrug it off as an inevitable and usually mild and short-lived visitation upon the emerging adult mind. After all, we might say, we ourselves experienced just these same frustrations—and probably took them more seriously and felt them more deeply than most people—yet here we are, having come through in one piece, relatively sane, relatively happy, integrated, functional, productive, etc. We *know* that anguish is defeatable—from experience—and that with patience, persistence, openness (and maybe a few intellectual and emotional pre-requisites) philosophy yields its treasure to honest seekers. But let us be realistic and frank about it—there *are* those who bring to philosophy too many emotional or psychological instabilities, or too little intellectual ability, to succeed, and they might well be better off with an uncritically adopted life-view. But, for the majority, is it better to let them handle the problem for themselves? Will they be stronger for it?

There are two basic reasons why I am concerned about the “hands off” approach. First, it seems to make the assumption that the majority of students in a beginning philosophy course will take other philosophy courses or continue reading philosophy. But most Introduction students *do not* enroll in higher-level courses, and what influence the traditional content of that one course has on their lives is in question. Second, do we recall clearly how we ourselves managed to make it through? Do we imagine ourselves to have had a special quality—a philosophical bent, intelligence, curiosity—which “saved” us from giving up and majoring in something else? If so, then those who do not have that quality deserve our help. But if not, then was it luck, or perhaps, was it the influence of someone else, such as a teacher, on us? And are we not now just such a possible influence on those who come to us for truth, meaning, and insight? I do not intend to make psycho-analysts out of us all (and teachers who strive to become father-images and “friends of the freshmen” run risks which deserve discussion somewhere). I only mean that we owe it to our students to devote some time and attention to the problem of *angst* which many of them will face. At the very least, we owe it to ourselves to discuss whether and to what extent this matter is a legitimate concern of teaching philosophy.

Of those who enter the labyrinth of philosophy, there are, perhaps, two extremes—those who simply do not have the ability, whether intellectual or psychological, to successfully wrestle with its challenges and those whose strength and maturity will carry them through with little assistance from others, including the teacher. The majority, of course, falls somewhere in between. To varying degrees, this large group of philosophy students is susceptible to a number of escapes and sidetracks, many of which can become permanent stumbling blocks to conceptual growth, unless something, or someone, intervenes. Before making any suggestions about the character of that intervention, I would like to review some of the more frequent types of response which I think most of us have encountered.

For example, in my own experience, roughly half of any given introductory class brings to philosophy a set of yet relatively unchallenged religious beliefs—frequently some form of conservative Protestantism. Not all teachers, clearly, will face as high a percentage, but for those of us who do, it can be a real problem. As representatives of philosophy, it is not our intention to divest anyone of religious belief *per se*, although we do insist upon subjecting any such beliefs to the light of open-minded inquiry. Sooner or later, the sheer press of unrelenting questioning and innumerable alternative perspectives takes a toll on a weakly defended peace of mind. Left to their own devices, these young people will not necessarily gird up their patience, persist in critical inquiry, and think it through in the long run. A few will actually drop out of a philosophy course, and,

in the absence of a good reason to be suspicious of the urgency of their retreat, may succeed in never again having to confront philosophical questions.

A surprisingly large number, however, will find such a hasty withdrawal both an uncomfortable sign of weakness in themselves, and unnecessary, since philosophy itself, they discover, contains some vindication of their resistance to further metaphysical inquiry. They might read something like the following from Pierre Bayle:

Our Reason is capable of nothing but the creation of a universal confusion and universal doubt; it has no sooner built up a system than it shows you the means of knocking it down. It is a veritable Penelope, who unpicks during the night the tapestry she has woven during the day. Accordingly, the best use that one can make of philosophical studies is to recognise that it is a way that leads astray, and that we ought to look for another guide, which we shall find in the light of Revelation.³

Armed with such a viewpoint, and with “philosophical authority” in its support, these students are capable of sitting through any number of philosophy courses with minimal identification with the ideas they encounter. At best, they carefully avoid any real grappling with philosophies alien to their credo; at worst, they manage to “take philosophy” in complete innocence of the spirit of critical inquiry which philosophy, above any particular systems or views, is all about.

There are many other versions of this “protective shield” with which philosophy students are prone to protect themselves. One of the most popular of these, related to “revelationism,” and with which some teachers may be more familiar, results from Eastern influences. Increasing numbers of students are coming to their first undergraduate philosophy course with a fair background in Oriental philosophies and religions. Most of that experience is with various Yogas, Zen Buddhism, mystical Taoism, and perhaps a few “filtered” cults or movements, such as Transcendental Meditation. That is, they are rarely acquainted with the epistemological and psychological intricacies of the literature involved, especially that of India, but have been exposed to the more mystical, anti-intellectualist “offshoots” of these traditions. Thus, such students are already equipped to fend off the not-so-gentle proddings of critical philosophizing with the conviction that, to him of serene spirit, these exercises in words and distinctions (*nama-rupa*) are inconsequential and worthless. Needless to say, this insouciance to human wondering and the pursuit of natural knowledge is reinforced, in their minds, by contact with Western mysticisms, and perhaps by their interpretations of, say, Schopenhauer or even Bergson. I do not mean, here or elsewhere, that these approaches to life and knowledge are philosophically unworthy of belief, investigation, or unwavering adherence. But, when they are adopted uncritically, in a state of relative philosophical naïveté, and used as a defense mechanism against further inquiry, then I think they become inimical to philosophy, and constitute an impasse for the teacher of philosophy.

I have observed in my students a few other shields against threatening perturbations, although they are not as common as those just mentioned. For example, every once in a while there appears a scientist, so enthusiastically committed to experimental methods and results, that all philosophy appears to him as pointless wrangling, word-picking, and an extravagant waste of pre-medical time. His shield, a kind of “test-tube curtain,” effectively screens out gadflies before their stingers reach target. And then there are the “love children,” caught up in the “beauty of human relationships” and at least temporarily impervious to hard questions, especially questions concerning precisely those human relationships. We might be tempted to consider them “pollyannas,” were it not for the fact that they are not totally naïve—they have journeyed just far enough to become frightened by the imagined (or perhaps not so unreal) precipice looming before them. I find them difficult to categorize clearly, because the influences upon them range from

Woodstock to Heinlein to Schweitzer's reverence for life, with overlaps into the Oriental mysticisms already referred to.

Not all reactions to philosophy take the form of "shields" *against* it; many of them are response patterns *encouraged by* it. One of the most frequent complaints I hear from philosophy students is that, having been caught up in the consistency, forcefulness, complexity or simplicity of some newly-discovered philosopher or system, they no sooner begin to feel at home than yet another claimant appears on the scene to carry them away, leaving the other demolished in its wake. This pattern of "Musical Isms" is not only a possible source of cynical mistrust of philosophy's chances for ever "getting anywhere." It can also become an infatuation in itself, when a student takes such delight in the experience of being overpowered by new concepts to the utter disregard of any others, that a blindness to historical and dialectical progressions is developed.

I have mixed feelings about this phenomenon, since *involvement* in the ideas is certainly one of the responses we desire. Yet, something is not quite right when students quickly and ardently adopt a philosophical viewpoint and then, just as quickly and ardently, throw that viewpoint overboard for the very next one which comes along. As with many of the reactions mentioned here, perhaps the difficulty has to do with an absence of a kind of perspective or distance which would serve to temper introductions to new ideas. In any event, I do think that "Musical Isms" can impede the learning process and, at the same time, be a cause for honest distress for the student. With an unwarned realization that one is being taken in again and again, it is not hard to generate a self-fulfilling prophecy concerning the lack of one's powers.

Although this and some other reactions might be interpretable and used as "escapes," I am thinking of them here as results of an incomplete experience with philosophy. And I am using them as ways of pointing up the kinds of things we might do to forestall such an incomplete experience. Philosophy is like a benevolent but didactic Santa Claus who says to a child, "Let me take that present you've got there and put it on my shelf for a moment." The child naturally resists at first, but Santa says, "Don't worry, you may have it back if you wish. But first, I want you to look over all these other presents, and then pick from all of them the one you like best." But the child is impatient, and runs away with the nearest package. If Santa is persistent, he may induce the child to trade once or twice more, but eventually the child wearies of trading and wants to settle down with what is in hand, long before the whole shelf is surveyed.

Since many philosophies have direct implications for society, politics and lifestyles, and since the increasing length of the educational process in our society produces in students an increasing impatience to get on with the business of living, it is not infrequent that philosophical study is aborted in the name of some movement, whether religious, communal, ethical, political, or whatever. Sometimes an individual responds only once to the call for action—"dropping out" of school, or even society, for good. It is more typical, however, to see a habit of short-term immersions develop, in which students dip in and out of various associations and activities. And, as with "Musical Isms," the main problem with this pattern is that its very gusto tends to inhibit awareness of dialectical interrelationships, and it can result in destructive self-criticism if it is perceived as a weakness of character.

Still, there are far more pernicious forms of activist immersion than those characterized by inveterate vacillation. I have in mind one particular "ism"—radical hedonism—which has a most unfortunate tendency to produce a self-assured sense of finality in its adherents. Although it is not necessarily entered into in great haste or without serious reflection, it nonetheless tends to be appropriated by students relatively early in the game, resulting in a real truncation of further philosophical development.

Radical hedonism, I suggest, truncates conceptual growth for two basic reasons. First, it tends to appear as the final resting place for the seeker of truth and wisdom, for the supposed reason that all you ever get from ideas and systems is a confused mind and an unsatisfied body—but, all that really matters is sensual pleasures and living for the moment. And second, its prescriptions quite often lead to increasingly debilitating and self-defeating states of mind and body. I do not attack pleasure *per se*, but it is discouraging to see some students indulge themselves, with self-righteous persuasion, to the point of virtually irreversible, self-inflicted incapacity.

I would like to mention a final type of unfortunate reaction to philosophy—specifically, the variety of postures which philosophy students like to present to their unsuspecting classmates. For instance, have you ever seen a student feign moodiness? Granted, it is difficult to distinguish from a constitutionally brooding personality, and from sincere soul-searching. But occasionally it becomes transparent, as though the student were saying, “Deep thinkers are often hard to get along with and moody. So I will act moodily and everyone will be impressed!” Or, perhaps practiced cleverness is more familiar—a student confronts his peers with a challenge something like: “Tell me what your view is, and I can completely destroy it with incredibly clever reasoning.” (This posture is particularly distressing to observe, because of a suspicion that it may be learned from philosophy teachers.) Lastly, there is a sham which is really heart-breaking, because of the obvious kinds of anguish it can give to others, friends and innocent bystanders alike. Here, hints are deliberately dropped that one is so agonized by life’s great questions that *anything* might happen. It is heart-breaking for the teacher of philosophy, too, who might suspect that this is a reaction to things like Gabriel Marcel’s sincere remark to the effect that true philosophizing begins with the recognition of suicide as a possibility.

I certainly do not insist that this review of reactions typical of fledgling philosophy students has been exhaustive, and I can probably be persuaded that some of them are not really what I take them to be. Nevertheless, my own teaching experience indicates that most of them are indeed present, and I further insist that most of them in one way or another are not only real obstacles to transmitting an appreciation for the philosophical enterprise, but also to some extent surmountable obstacles.

It may be that many teachers are still not completely satisfied that the concern expressed here for the “psyche” of our students is either appropriate or justified. It is to be admitted, for example, that students can be quite sanguine about the reasons which incline them to take various courses in an undergraduate curriculum. The whole process of getting an education can easily deteriorate into a mechanical, practical and even cynical series of “exposures.” And the worst part of that situation is the influence it can have on those who provide the education. But, I think it is a profound mistake to underestimate just how much, in the minds of those who come to it, philosophy continues to represent the most likely source of genuine knowledge and wisdom, the highest example of creative intelligence, and the greatest achievements in man’s quest to understand the “meaning of life.” It is an equally grave mistake to underestimate the intense disappointment and despair experienced by those who without advisement discover that philosophy cannot meet certain inappropriate expectations, or who are ill-equipped and unforewarned concerning the need to approach philosophy with a combination of patience, perspective and perseverance. Jacques Maritain expressed the surely unfair view of many in the following way:

Truly, philosophers play a strange game. They know very well that one thing alone counts, and that all their medley of subtle discussions relates to one single question: Why are we born on this earth? And they also know that they will never be able to answer it.

Nevertheless, they continue sedately to amuse themselves. Do they not see that people come to them from all points of the compass, not with a desire to partake of their subtlety, but because they hope to receive from them one word of life? If they have such words, why do they not cry them from the housetops, asking their disciples to give, if necessary, their very blood for them? If they have no such words, why do they allow people to believe they will receive from them something which they cannot give?⁴

We do not have to entirely agree or disagree with this view in order to recognize that what philosophy can and cannot do is a frequent source of misunderstanding among those who have not yet pursued its study very far. Therefore, partly in defense of our tradition, but partly for our own renewal, we owe it to those who sit before us to discuss with them what they can expect, the satisfying and the unsatisfying, with as much patience, honesty and optimism as we can muster.

One of the things I am suggesting is that we ought to maintain a particular attitude and emphasis in our teaching. That is, we should be able to convey, particularly to beginning students, and to whatever extent it is in fact true for us, the sense of satisfaction we continue to derive from philosophy, *in spite* of its inherent open-endedness. We should emphasize those occasions when philosophy *has* provided “answers” for us. Do we believe that the search for truth “inevitably fails” or that “our Reason is capable of nothing but the creation of a universal confusion and universal doubt”? We may understandably believe that ultimately our discipline, as a collection of wise voices, will provide a negative answer to those questions. But philosophy in general will never be given a fair hearing by many of our students unless we can indicate clearly, simply, and emphatically at the very outset that such an answer is forthcoming, and indicate along with this at least some of the grounds for our confidence.

As for specific suggestions, it occurs to me that we might incorporate into our courses—with or without written materials—what could be termed “Cave lectures.” Such prefatory discussions could provide advice and advance warning concerning the prospects philosophy holds, both for those who go on in their studies and for those who do not. The exercise, such as outlined here, of identifying and characterizing some of the expectations and reactions which students might observe in themselves and in their peers could be very valuable. In addition, such a discussion might help instill a measure of patience and even self-confidence which would enhance the chances of a satisfying conceptual outcome. I might even suggest that these discussions could serve, if a teacher chose to handle them in this manner, as a technique for setting a tone of relaxed, open (perhaps even cheerful?) informality for a course. I would concede that the timing of such advice could be a problem, and that it might be more effective to reserve one’s “Caves” for some point well into the course, when such cautions and concerns are more likely to strike somewhat sympathetic chords. But, however the *when* might be worked out, *that* students would greatly benefit from such lectures or discussions I have little doubt.

One can probably think of other promising methods for mitigating these problems, but I will suggest only two more here. First, I would urge that special efforts be made to make sure that students feel free to take advantage of office hours in order to explore some of these problems in particular with us. In the classroom environment, even normally outspoken students are reluctant to volunteer comments on these sometimes very personal matters. For this kind of advice to be effective, therefore, it is essential that students feel comfortable in coming to the office—that the posted hours were not simply *pro forma* or limited to other matters. And second, I think that one of the most important things a teacher—especially of philosophy—can do for students is to allow them occasional glimpses of his or her own intellectual journey. There is merit, of course, in the suggestion that we ought sometimes to play devil’s advocate for the purpose of promoting

critical acumen in our students, and that when we preach our prejudices too often we are being unfair to those who are not yet able to point out their flaws. But I think it is absolutely disastrous to philosophy and to effective teaching if we *appear* never to say what we really think, and to be arguing for the sake of argument.

I have been dealing with an aspect of teaching philosophy which I think is important, but which has not yet received much attention in our professional dialogue. We no doubt have observed these “*Angst* phenomena,” and we may have made some attempts to deal with them. Still, I think we should be sharpening our focus on them, analyzing them in greater detail, and sharing accounts of our experiences. Teaching introductory philosophy, I repeat, is more than the transmission of ideas, and more than the development of critical thought. It is also the piloting of a very fragile vessel through the frequently stormy first leg of a long journey.

1. W. T. Jones, in James L. Christian, *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering* (Rinehart Press, 1973), p. 4. All references in this paper are drawn from this text. My purpose is to justify my assumption that beginning students would indeed be exposed to these or similar remarks.

2. Christian, p. 484.

3. Christian, p. 26

4. Christian, p. 45.



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