

From Epistemology to Transcendence

I - Epistemology

David Hume, building on Descartes' postulation of the priority of experience for knowledge, famously argued that we cannot establish the validity of causal laws on the evidence of our sense experience. Immanuel Kant's alarmed response to Hume argued that causality is one of a few critical, transcendent conditions that precede experience. Without these conditions there would be no possibility of having experience. Only mind can perceive these conditions, because they are abstract and mathematical in nature, necessarily transcending sensory experience.

Science and modern culture have paradoxically absorbed *both* Hume's stipulation of the priority of sensory experience *and* Kant's assertion that mental and mathematical abstractions are fundamental and prior to sensory experience. The paradox issues culturally in a confused materialism that values acquisition and consumption over satisfaction and happiness and fosters solipsistic alienation. In behavioral science, for instance, the theory of functionalism maintains paradoxically that all the functions of mind, including theorizing, can be reduced to the material physiology of the brain. Daniel Dennett pointedly exemplifies the functionalist perspective. (Robinson, D.N., 2008, pp. 203-6) Solipsistic alienation leads variously to anti-science, pseudo-science, aggressive religiosity, and empty emotional fervor.

Whitehead embraces the Cartesian postulate of the priority of experience, but he deconstructs Hume's account of sensory experience to discover causal experience within it. Whitehead points out that Hume ironically overlooked his own diction in describing sensory experience. Hume says that we see *with* [emphasis added] our eyes, hear *with* our ears, taste *with* our palettes, etc. But he overlooks the *with*. The *with* reveals the causal role of our sense organs in producing our sense perceptions. The *with* evidences the intimate relation of our bodies with our experience and the intimate relation of our bodies in our perception of the world around us. Overlooking the *withness* of the body results culturally in the paradox of denying its biological ickyness while elevating it as an iconic object of media aesthetic. The princess in the fairy tale advertizes her kiss to inveigle the frog to retrieve the golden ball, but reneges and denies the slimy creature her bed.

Whitehead's epistemology of perception accounts for both the nature of sense perceptions and the instrumentality of sense organs in those perceptions. One mode of perception yields the sensory world, epitomized by the extended world of visual perception. It is continuous to our eyes and yet divisible into shapes and objects, the three dimensions of geometry, and Newtonian infinitesimals. The other mode of perception is manifest as the *withness* of the body in perception, a *withness* so intimate that many overlook its causal accompaniment in producing our sensations. Further overlooked is its even deeper role in supporting feeling, from the vector feelings that bring depth to our visual perceptions to the mystical sense of the wholeness of the universe.

Whitehead's epistemology of perception addresses Hume's difficulty without resorting to Kantian extremism. It does so by reaching back to Descartes' understanding, overlooked

by subsequent interpreters, that there needed to be a metaphysically comparable substance connecting corporeal and mental substance. The divine substance Descartes postulated as mediating mind and body did not historically withstand subsequent philosophical critique that generally discounted divinity. Eliminating divinity, however, disposed the baby with the bathwater.

The causality that Hume denied and Kant stretched to justify is a basic fact of experience for Whitehead. Experience for him comprises mental and physical poles metaphysically just as human experience is actually both physical and mental.

The modern paradoxical absorption of the Hume/Kant dichotomy does not resolve it. Intellectually one can compartmentalize the dichotomy by a kind of dissociation that involves a superposition of mind and body as unsatisfactory as the situation of Schrödinger's cat. But even intense intellectual engagement cannot resolve the dichotomy, because intellect alone can only capture experience abstractly.

II - Practice

Western philosophy at its origins comprised not only intellectual speculation, but also availed practices aimed at yielding experience beyond intellectual understanding. Plato considered such experience critical to full understanding of the doctrine he propounded. Partly Plato was inspired by Socrates's concern for philosophy as an eminently practical endeavor. Ironically, though Plato felt the full force of Socrates's life example, later interpretation of his writings inclined philosophy to become mostly conceptual and theoretical. While subsequent development of modern Western philosophy has promoted great scientific and technical progress, it has let practice fall by the way. Modern philosophy is pursued almost exclusively as an intellectual activity, and consequently the gap has widened between philosophy and "practical" endeavors.

In this essay "practice" means a method or program of behavior with a transcendent goal. It does not mean a program that reinforces a particular religious or secular belief. It is a spiritual activity that seeks knowledge as opposed to belief, but not knowledge about this or that; rather knowledge that transcends any set of particulars. What is more, the knowledge depends on an experience in which, and only in which, the knowledge comes of realization. Some argue that no such knowledge is possible. But this possibility cannot be excluded by logic or argument. In fact, it is a central characteristic of the experience that it lies beyond the capacity of reason adequately to characterize.

Another, less abstract argument holds that these practices are merely a holdover from "primary sympathetic magic" (Cornford, F. M., 1957, p. 124) and that philosophy superseded them and created a superior understanding of the world. This paper agrees that the ecstatic experiences fostered by these practices are central to the development of philosophy, but it argues that they are not primitive residua. Rather they are critical to complete philosophical understanding. Because academic, modern Western philosophy eschewed these experiences, it has lost the basic claim Socrates staked to education as "true therapy of the soul." (Versenyi, L., 1963, p. 74.)

Spiritual, therapeutic practice in its Greek origins began with pulling on the goat skin (*trageos*) of Dionysius, developed into the great cathartic tragedies, and became the

prodigious endeavor that was ancient philosophy. The overweening intellectualization of modern philosophy has chased it from its home in the center of Plato's polis to a lesser suburb, psychology. Pierre Hardot (1995) provides an extensive account of the history of the loss.

Ancient Philosophy and Practice

Socrates, and later Diogenes and Epicurus among the ancients, exemplify philosophy so linked with practice that life and practice coincide. We see Socrates the most vividly because Plato's genius dramatized Socrates's search for self-understanding in contrast to the Sophists' concern merely for winning arguments and building reputation.

Despite his dedication to Socrates, Plato appreciated the intellectual power of Sophistry sufficiently to co-opt and deploy it in his own attempt to extend the Socratic mission. Ironically, that deployment supports the intellectual orientation by which modern philosophy obscures the importance of practice for Plato himself. Plato testifies directly to the importance of practice in his *Seventh Letter*:

One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself — no matter how they pretend to have acquired it, whether from my instruction or from others or by their own discovery. Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. (341c-d)

Plato refers to the ineffable, transcendent, noetic experience that is the heart of mysticism. He was inspired by the example of Socrates and by a Pythagorean and Orphic heritage that supported his experience with Socrates. Pythagoras exhibited a charisma comparable to Socrates's. Plato espoused Pythagoras's conjunction of mathematics and mysticism. The importance of practice for Pythagoras can be seen in the sacred concerns of his cult and its accompanying rules of behavior.

It is interesting to consider, by the way, that Pythagoras's mysticism and his insight into the nature of the octave suggest that music may represent a line of development from Orphic rites to the Sufi practice of music and dance. Peter Kingsley (1996) supports this suggestion by tracing a line from Empedocles and the early Pythagoreans down to southern Egypt, and from there into the world that preceded Islam.

Plato's initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries provides additional testimony to the importance of practice for him, as well as ancients from Sophocles to Pindar. In *Phaedrus* (244-249) Plato points to the connection between the divine madness associated with the mysteries and the philosophical life. Not only Plato's approbation, but also the almost two-thousand-year run of the Eleusinian mysteries, during which the initiates almost without exception held them in close confidence, attest to the importance of practice for the ancients.

Cicero's testimony centuries later evidences the enduring power and importance of these practices:

...beloved Athens has brought to birth, and contributed to human life, many outstanding and divine creations, and nothing better than those mysteries. Thanks to them we have become mild and cultivated, moving from a rough and savage life to a state of civilization; we have learned from so-called "initiations" things which are in fact the first principles of life, and we have been taught a way of living happily and also of dying with brighter hopes. (*Laws*, Book Two, 36)

Plato not only emphasizes that understanding what he teaches requires a singular kind of experience, he also describes clearly and in detail in the *Symposium* a method of meditation for attaining a "final revelation:"

There bursts upon [the candidate for initiation] that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshiper as it is to every other.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is — but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness. (210e-211b)

Although the method of the *Symposium* has usually been approached intellectually by modern commentators, the ancients viewed it as a meditation practice. Porphyry testified that Plotinus used it for the effect Plato suggested: "by meditation and by the method that Plato teaches in the *Banquet* [*Symposium*]" Plotinus "lifted himself ... to the first and all-transcendent divinity." (O'Brian, E., 1975, p. 16)

Modern Times

The final separation of practice from philosophy in the West took place as the harbor that the Church long provided for philosophy became less used. Philosophy ranked second to theology in that harbor, but it was in some way supported by the experiential, diurnal context of prayer and devotion. Tying philosophy to religious practices, however, ultimately attenuated the link between philosophy and practice. The modern intellectualization of philosophy attenuated the link as well, from a different angle of attack.

We mark the beginning of modern philosophy with Descartes and of modern natural philosophy, i.e. science, with Galileo. Galileo fell from the context of the Church, Descartes clearly stood outside it, and philosophy became preeminently an intellectual endeavor. Very importantly, philosophy was freed from the constraints that had come about when practice evolved into organized religion. Philosophy consequently proliferated into the sciences and social sciences that inform the innovation and

prosperity of modern Western culture. On the other hand, these very endeavors ultimately eschewed the name of philosophy and relegated it to a small room in the academy.

Cultural differences mean that any modern practice that tries to regain the original function of practice in philosophy must necessarily differ from ancient practice. The pace of modern life, its complexity, and the fragmentation of modern community all constrain the possibilities of practice. Historically, practice was facilitated by community, from the Pythagorean cult to the Christian monastery. Today the sort of enduring community that historically facilitated spiritual practice is rare. The experience fostered by such practice has become occasional, often only the result of individual philosophers pursuing a solitary quest.

William James's experience stands out. In a pointed index of modernity, it was tied to his experiment with a chemical, in his case nitrous oxide. He found it to "stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree." He continues:

One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question, for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. (James, W., 1903, p. 388)

That James's influence issued in two streams speaks to the modern bifurcation of psychology and philosophy. The philosophical stream is pragmatism. The psychological stream has had several names, becoming contemporarily the minor trickle called transpersonal psychology. The story of James's excursion from the philosophy department at Harvard to create the psychology department there and then his subsequent return to the philosophy department illustrates a dilemma of the modern bifurcation.

One of James's significant influences on philosophy, besides his contributions to the corpus of pragmatism, was his inspiration of Alfred North Whitehead. James's "drops of experience" became Whitehead's actual occasions. His *Varieties of Religious Experience* informed Whitehead's doctrine of religion as "the art and theory of the internal life of man," a doctrine Whitehead characterizes, reflecting James's experiential orientation as "the direct negation of the theory that religion is primarily a social fact." (Whitehead, A. N., 1926, p. 6)

The kind of practice that Plato and the other ancients understood as essential to the philosophical life can yield a climactic, transcendent experience that assures a person's

utter and profound connection to the entirety of the universe, revealed as self-sustaining meaning. It is not a rational experience, but it supports the very possibility of reason — the possibility for life and the universe to make sense. In so doing it provides assurance in the face of death by providing an experience of what modern psychology calls “ego death,” a kind of dress rehearsal for one’s final, mortal demise.

Whitehead calls the experience Peace, and his description suggests that its value for philosophy is loosing the fetters and preoccupations that can constrain understanding. Peace is:

... a positive feeling which crowns the ‘life and motion’ of the soul. It is hard to define and difficult to speak of. It is not a hope for the future nor is it an interest in present details. It is a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, unverballed and yet momentous in its coordination of values. Its first effect is the removal of the stress of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul’s preoccupation with itself. Thus Peace carries with it a surpassing of personality Its emotional effect is the subsidence of turbulence which inhibits. More accurately, it preserves the springs of energy, and at the same time masters them for the avoidance of paralyzing distractions. (Whitehead, A. N., 1933, p. 367)

III – Conclusion

The mysteries of Eleusis promoted an experience of ecstatic transcendence that numerous ancient philosophers considered intrinsic to the conduct of philosophy. Plato, as an initiate, explicitly stated that such an experience was essential to understanding his teaching. The alliance of spiritual exercise with philosophy persisted into Hellenistic times, but finally succumbed to the medieval Scholastic distinction “drawn between *theologia* and *philosophia*.” (Hardot, P., 1995, p.107)

Modern Western philosophy has focused on intellectual endeavor, eschewing the experiential understanding Plato thought essential to philosophy. A few modern philosophers have understood the importance of the experience Plato advocated. William James is one. He is an inspiration for Whitehead, whose metaphysic avails James’s apprehension of experience that is deeper than sensation or cognition, and conceives “drops” of experience as the fundament of the universe. Whitehead’s focus metaphysically echoes Plato’s insistence on experience transcendent of sensation and intellect as critical to philosophy.

A question for philosophy today is whether or how the experience Plato considered essential to profound philosophical understanding might be facilitated so that it is a way of life, rather than simply an intellectual endeavor. Suggestion might be drawn from the inspiration of William James that has issued through humanistic into transpersonal psychology. It is the most philosophical endeavor in psychology. It embraces a plurality of experience and pragmatically eschews any epistemologically reduction of them to various materialisms.

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