

The Unwritten Philosophy

Fountainhead of the Maieutic Arts

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The common view philosophers have, or have had of philosophy is that it is the quest for a universal system, “*a structure of rational argument, which, if it is ever valid, claims to be valid for all minds at all times and places*”, as the great classical scholar F.M. Cornford put it.

But that is neither the only, nor the original view of philosophy – and I am referring to both East and West. William James maintained that the divergences and controversies in the history of philosophy are largely a clash of personalities, a reflection of the different temperament of the philosophers, and that the “*potentest of our premisses is never mentioned*”. The result is that at the very base of philosophical discussion there is a “*certain insincerity*” – we could say, a lie.

Unamuno speaks in a similar vein. “*At the starting-point of all philosophy – in the real starting point – there is a wherefore*”, he says. He finds that philosophizing is not an activity carried on for its own sake but that philosophers philosophize “*in order to live*”.

Nietzsche is most pungent of all. He regards systems of philosophy as the confession of their authors and philosophy as involuntary and unconscious autobiography. He says that if you want to know how the most abstruse conclusions have been reached, you should look not so much at the logic of the arguments, but what morality the author is promoting. He claims that philosophy is not born of the “*impulse to knowledge*” as Aristotele would have us believe, on the contrary, knowledge and philosophizing are annexed to the service of impulses and motives far darker and more secret – so secret that even the philosopher himself is not aware of them.

Cornford sees Nietzsche as finally “*letting the cat out of the bag*”. His own view is that the real, hidden effort and struggle of philosophers is to construct a fortress to “*shelter souls haunted by despair, and to make it possible to achieve resignation, self-mastery, and peace of mind*”.

The idea here is that what generally goes under the name of “Philosophy” is camouflage, a façade, a thin civilized and genteel veneer of calm well-reasoned arguments consistent and

coherent, seemingly following a logic of their own independent of the existential condition and problems of the philosopher.

But behind this “Manifest Philosophy”, this professional performance, this pleasant mask, yes, this lie, there are burning existential issues, real dilemmas, issues and motives so fierce and primordial, so primitive and desperate and so intensely personal that the philosopher is ashamed to reveal, even – I should say, most of all – to himself, for to reveal this is to show himself in all his nakedness, as he is, in his bare and frail humanity, without mask, without “habitus”, without a protective self-image, human, all too human – He no longer recognizes himself.

Thus conceived – I should say, thus lived – philosophy is no mere play of thoughts and ideas but an activity of what is sometimes called the “whole man”, of the human being in his entirety, in his most bare and elementary humanity, prior to and without the quaint home-made distinctions of passion vs. reason, motives, emotions and feeling vs. thoughts and ideas, etc. etc.

The brutal truth of philosophy and philosophizing outside of the crumbling façade of academia is that it is in its very essence a way of being and a way of living, a maieutic journey of rebirth and metamorphosis, the savage, elemental struggle of tormented souls living in chains and in darkness in a world of shadow, desperately striving for light and freedom, truth and reality, to use Plato’s famous image, or as Eastern philosophers following Gautama put it, souls drowning in the sea of sorrow, yearning for deliverance to the other shore.

This Unwritten Philosophy, in its very essence Maieutic Philosophy and mother of the Maieutic Arts, is the real, original and authentic, philosophy. The other philosophy, anaemic and academic, the philosophy of many words and endless controversy is what we may call the “Manifest Content”, shadow boxing, performance, abstract Quixotian activity. Its real significance is revealed only by an analysis analogous to the interpretation of dreams.

This original, authentic, maieutic philosophy **is** what in both East and West is described as the Path of Liberation and Enlightenment. In Plato’s own words, having followed the Path, dangerous and painful, out of the cave, or at least having gone far enough to be able to act independently – in other words, having become a philosopher, so forged by the journey itself – one can then “guide” others who have the courage and the willingness, along the same path. The path is the coming to terms with the universal existential problem of humanity: life, death, suffering – fear, loneliness, hate, grief, despair – the wonder, the joy

and the horror of it all. And, needless to say, we are dealing here with public as well as private life.

Each journey is an experience so unique and unpredictable, so tailor-made, that the “Guide” cannot count on doctrines and theories, nor on pre-fabricated methodologies, especially as the client or student takes the lion’s share of responsibility in the conduct and procedures of the dialogic encounters, so much so that he or she cannot blame the guide if the journey comes to a bad end (VII Letter).

For these same reasons the journey cannot be described as Plato says, again in the VII Letter. Here we have the original Unwritten Philosophy, Maieutic Philosophy, where the real teacher is the experience itself. The art is learned like any other art, in the workshop of life. Plato says in effect, if you are tired of living in ignorance darkness and despair, and want to see the light, and want to be free and truly yourself, and want to live in a world that is real instead of an illusory one, you have to make the painful journey. Only then will you be a philosopher, only then will you be enlightened, only then will you have the knowledge and the skill to help others along the same path. And for that, you will have to come and stay with us – for a long time.