

Dr. Kyon Lee
Introductⁿ & Philosophy
Reading Material

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I. IN PRAISE OF PHILOSOPHY

Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
-Essential writings of
Merleau-Ponty-

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The man who witnesses his own research, that is to say his own inner disorder, cannot feel himself to be the heir of the distinguished men whose names he sees on these walls. If, in addition, he is a philosopher, that is to say if he knows that he knows nothing, how could he believe himself justified in occupying this chair, and how could he even desire to do so? The answer to these questions is very simple. Since its foundation the Collège de France has been charged with the duty, not of giving to its hearers already-acquired truths, but the idea of free investigation. If, last winter, the Collège de France desired to maintain a chair of philosophy, it is because philosophical ignorance puts the crowning touch on the spirit of search to which it is devoted. If a philosopher solicits your votes, my dear colleagues, it is, you well know, in order to live the philosophical life more completely. And if you have elected him, it is to support this endeavor in his person. Although I feel unequal to the honor, I am nevertheless happy to undertake the task, since it is a great good fortune, as Stendhal said, for one "to have his passion as a profession." I have been touched at finding you so resolved, all other considerations aside, in desiring to maintain philosophy in your midst, and it is a pleasure to thank you for this today....

The philosopher is marked by the distinguishing trait that he possesses inseparably the taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity. When he limits himself to accepting ambiguity, it is called equivocation. But among the great it becomes a theme; it contributes to establish.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, trans. by John Wild and James M. Edie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963), pp. 3-5, 32-42, 58-64. Reprinted by permission.

lishing certitudes rather than menacing them: Therefore it is necessary to distinguish good and bad ambiguity. Even those who have desired to work out a completely positive philosophy have been philosophers only to the extent that, at the same time, they have refused the right to install themselves in absolute knowledge. They taught not this knowledge, but its becoming in us, not the absolute but, at most, our absolute relation to it, as Kierkegaard said. What makes a philosopher is the movement which leads back without ceasing from knowledge to ignorance, from ignorance to knowledge, and a kind of rest in this movement. . . . Thus it is the philosopher and he alone who is judge. Here we have come back to the self and to the tête-à-tête of the self with the true. Now we have said that there is no solitary truth. Are we therefore on a revolving wheel? We are, but it is not the wheel of the skeptics. It is true that in the last resort there is no judge, that I do not think according to the true alone, not according to myself alone, nor according to the others alone, because each of the three has need of the other two and it would be a non-sense to sacrifice any one. A philosophical life always bases itself on these three cardinal points. The enigma of philosophy (and of expression) is that sometimes life is the same to oneself, to others, and to the true. These are the moments which justify it. The philosopher counts only on them. He will never accept to will himself against men, nor to will men against himself, nor against the true, nor the true against them. He wishes to be everywhere at once, at the risk of never being completely anywhere. His opposition is not aggressive; he knows that this often announces capitulation. But he understands the rights of others and of the outside too well to permit them any infringement. If, when he is engaged in external enterprises, the attempt is made to draw him beyond the point where his activity loses the meaning which inspired it, his rejection is all the more tranquil in that it is founded on the same motives as his acceptance. Hence the rebellious gentleness, the pensive engagement, the intangible presence which disquiet those who are with him. As Bergson said of Ravaisson in a tone so personal that one imagines him to be speaking of himself: "He gave no hold. . . . He was the kind of man who does not even offer sufficient resistance for one to flatter himself that he has ever seen him give way."

If we have recalled these words of Bergson, not all of which are in his books, it is because they make us feel that there is a tension in the

relation of the philosopher with other persons or with life, and that this uneasiness is essential to philosophy. We have forgotten this a little. The modern philosopher is frequently a functionary, always a writer, and the freedom allowed him in his books admits an opposite view. What he says enters first of all into an academic world where the choices of life are deadened and the occasions for thought are cut off. Without books a certain speed of communication would be impossible, and there is nothing to say against them. But in the end they are only words expressed a bit more coherently. The philosophy placed in books has ceased to challenge men. What is unusual and almost insupportable in it is hidden in the respectable life of the great philosophical systems. In order to understand the total function of the philosopher, we must remember that even the philosophical writers whom we read [and of whom we are one] have never ceased to recognize as their patron a man who never wrote, who never taught, at least in any official chair, who talked with anyone he met on the street, and who had certain difficulties with public opinion and with the public powers. We must remember Socrates.

The life and death of Socrates are the history of the difficult relations that the philosopher faces—when he is not protected by literary immunity—with the gods of the City, that is to say with other men, and with the fixed absolute whose image they extend to him. If the philosopher were a rebel, it would be less shocking. For in the last analysis each one of us knows for his own part that the world as it is, is unacceptable. We like to have this written down for the honor of humanity, though we may forget it when we return to our affairs. Hence rebellion is not displeasing. But with Socrates it is something different. He teaches that religion is true, and he offered sacrifices to the gods. He teaches that one ought to obey the City, and he obeys it from the very beginning to the end. He is reproached not so much for what he does as for his way of doing it, his motive. In the *Apology* there is a saying which explains it all, when Socrates says to his judges: *Athenians, I believe as none of those who accuse me*. Revealing words! He believes more than they, but also he believes in another way, and in a different sense. True religion for Socrates is a religion in which the gods are not in conflict, where the omens remain ambiguous—since, in the last analysis, says the Socrates of Xenophon, it is the gods, not the birds, who foresee the future—where the divine reveals itself, like

the *daemon* of Socrates, only by a silent warning and a reminder to man of his ignorance. Religion is, therefore, true, but true in a sense that it does not know—true as Socrates thinks it, not as it thinks.

And in the same way when he justifies the City, it is for his own reasons, not for *raisons d'Etat*. He does not run away. He appears before the tribunal. But there is little respect in the reasons he gives for this. First of all, he says, at my age the lust for life is not in place; furthermore, one would not put up with me much better elsewhere; finally, I have always lived here. There remains the celebrated argument for the authority of the laws. But we need to examine it more closely. Xenophon makes Socrates say that one may obey the laws in wishing for them to change, as one fights a war in wishing for peace. Thus it is not that the laws are good but that they pertain to order, and one needs order in order to change it. When Socrates refuses to flee, it is not that he recognizes the tribunal. It is that he may be in a better position to challenge it. By fleeing, that is, he would become an enemy of Athens and would make the sentence against him true. By remaining, he has won, whether he be acquitted or condemned, for he will prove his philosophy either in leading his judges to accept it, or in his own acceptance of the sentence.

Aristotle, seventy-five years later, will say, in leaving the city of his own accord, that there is no sense in allowing the Athenians to commit a new crime against philosophy. Socrates, on the other hand, works out for himself another idea of philosophy. It does not exist as a sort of idol of which he would be the guardian and which he must defend. It exists rather in its living relevance to the Athenians, in its absent presence, in its obedience without respect. Socrates has a way of obeying which is a way of resisting, while Aristotle disobeys in seamliness and dignity. Everything that Socrates does is ordered around the secret principle that one is annoyed if he does not comprehend. Always to blame by excess or default, always more simple and yet less abstract than the others, more flexible and less accommodating, he makes them ill at ease, and inflicts upon them the unpardonable offense of making them doubt themselves. He is there in life, at the assembly of the people, and before the tribunal, but in such a way that one can make nothing of him. He gives them no eloquence, no prepared rhetoric. By entering into the game of respect, he would only justify the calumny against him. But even less any show of defiance! This would be to forget that in a certain sense the others can hardly judge otherwise

than they do. The same philosophy obliges him to appear before the judges and also makes him different from them. The same freedom which brings him among them frees him from their prejudices. The very same principle makes him both universal and singular. There is a part of him by which he is the kinsman of them all. It is called *reason* and is invisible to them. For them, as Aristophanes says, it is cloudy, empty chattering. The commentators sometimes say it is all a misunderstanding. Socrates believes in religion and the City, in spirit and in truth. They believe in them to the letter. He and his judges are not on the same ground. If only he had been better understood, one would have seen clearly that he was neither seeking for new gods, nor neglecting the gods of Athens. He was only trying to give them a sense; he was interpreting them.

The trouble is that this operation is not so innocent. It is in the world of the philosopher that one saves the gods and the laws by understanding them, and to make room on earth for the life of philosophy, it is precisely philosophers like Socrates who are required. Religion interpreted—this is for the others religion suppressed. And the charge of impiety—this is the point of view of the others towards him. He gives reasons for obeying the laws. But it is already too much to have reasons for obeying, since over against all reasons other reasons can be opposed, and then respect disappears. What one expects of him—this is exactly what he is not able to give—is assent to the thing itself, without restriction. He, on the contrary, comes before the judges, yes, but it is to explain to them what the City is. As if they did not know! As if they were not the City! He does not plead for himself. He pleads the cause of a city which would accept philosophy. He reverses the roles and says to them: it is not myself I am defending; it is you. In the last analysis the City is in him and they are the enemies of the laws. It is they who are being judged, and he who is judging them—an inevitable reversal in the philosopher, since he justifies what is outside by values which come from within.

What can one do if he neither pleads his cause nor challenges to combat? One can speak in such a way as to make freedom show itself in and through the various respects and considerations, and to unlock hate by a smile—a lesson for our philosophy which has lost both its smile and its sense of tragedy. This is what is called irony. The irony of Socrates is a distant but true relation with others. It expresses the fundamental fact that each of us is only himself inescapably, and never-

theless recognizes himself in the other. It is an attempt to open up both of us for freedom. As is true of tragedy, both the adversaries are justified, and true irony uses a double-meaning which is founded on these facts. There is therefore no self-conceit. It is irony on the self no less than on the others. As Hegel well says, it is *naive*. The story of Socrates is not to say less in order to win an advantage in showing great mental power, or in suggesting some esoteric knowledge. "Whenever I convince anyone of his ignorance," the *Apology* says with melancholy, "my listeners imagine that I know everything that he does not know." Socrates does not know any *more* than they know. He knows only that there is no absolute knowledge, and that it is by this absence that we are open to the truth.

To this good irony Hegel opposes a romantic irony which is equivocal, tricky, and self-conceited. It relies on the power which we can use, if we wish, to give any kind of meaning to anything whatsoever. It levels things down; it plays with them and permits anything. The irony of Socrates is not this kind of madness. Or at least if there are traces of bad irony in it, it is Socrates himself who teaches us to correct Socrates. When he says: I make them dislike me and this is the proof that what I say is true, he is wrong on the basis of his own principles. All sound reasoning is offensive, but all that offends us is not true. At another time, when he says to his judges: I will not stop philosophizing *even if I must die many times*, he taunts them and tempts their cruelty. Sometimes it is clear that he yields to the giddiness of insolence and spitefulness, to self-magnification and the aristocratic spirit. He was left with no other resource than himself. As Hegel says again, he appeared "at the time of the decadence of the Athenian democracy; he drew away from the externally existent and retired into himself to seek there for the just and the good." But in the last analysis it was precisely this that he was self-prohibited from doing, since he thought that one cannot be just all alone and, indeed, that in being just all alone one ceases to be just. If it is truly the City that he is defending, it is not merely the City in him but that actual City existing around him. The five hundred men who gathered together to judge him were neither all important people nor all fools. Two hundred and twenty-one among them thought he was innocent, and a change of thirty votes would have saved Athens from the dishonor. It was also a question of those after Socrates who would run the same danger. He was perhaps free to bring down the anger of the fools

upon himself, to pardon them with a certain contempt, and then to pass beyond his life. But this would not absolve him in advance from the evil he might bring on others and would not enable him to pass beyond *their* lives. It was therefore necessary to give to the tribunal its chance of understanding. In so far as we live with others, no judgment we make on them is possible which leaves us out, and which places them at a distance. *All is vain, or all is evil, as likewise all is well*, which are hard to distinguish, do not come from philosophy.

It is possible to fear that our time also is rejecting the philosopher that dwells within it, and that once again philosophy will evaporate into nothing but clouds. For to philosophize is to seek, and this is to imply that there are things to see and to say. Well, today we no longer seek. We "return" to one or the other of our traditions and "defend" it. Our convictions are founded less on perceived values and truths than on the vices and errors of those we do not like. We love very few things, though we dislike many. Our thinking is a thought in retreat or in reply. Each of us is expiating for his youth. This decadence is in accord with the course of our history. Having passed a certain point of tension, ideas cease to develop and live. They fall to the level of justifications and pretexts, relics of the past, points of honor; and what one pompously calls the movement of ideas is reduced to the sum of our nostalgias, our grudges, our timidities, and our phobias. In this world, where negation and gloomy passion take the place of certitude, one does not seek above all to see, and, because it seeks to see, philosophy passes for impiety. It would be easy to show this in connection with two absolutes which are at the center of our discussions: God and history....

Let us show, in conclusion, that views like these justify philosophy even in its weakness.

For it is useless to deny that philosophy limps. It dwells in history and in life, but it wishes to dwell at their center, at the point where they come into being with the birth of meaning. It is not content with what is already there. Since it is expression in act, it comes to itself only by ceasing to coincide with what is expressed, and by taking its distance in order to see its meaning. It is, in fact, the Utopia of possession at a distance. Hence it can be tragic, since it has its own contrary within itself. It is never a *serious* occupation. The serious man, if he exists, is the man of one thing only, to which he assents. But the most resolute philosophers always wish the contrary—to realize, but in destroying;

to suppress, but also to conserve. Always, they have an afterthought. The philosopher pays attention to the serious man—of action, of religion, or of passion—perhaps more acutely than anyone. But precisely in doing this, one feels that he is different. His own actions are acts of witness, like the "signifying acts" by which the companions of Julien Sorel at the seminary sought to prove their piety. Spinoza writes "*ultimi barbarorum*" on the tyrants' gate. Lagneau took legal action before the University authorities to rehabilitate an unfortunate candidate. Having done these things, each returns home, and remains there for years. The philosopher of action is perhaps the farthest removed from action, for to speak of action with depth and rigor is to say that one does not desire to act.

Machiavelli is the complete contrary of a machiavellian, since he describes the tricks of power and, as we say, "gives the whole show away." The seducer and the politician, who live in the dialectic and have a feeling or instinct for it, try their best to keep it hidden. It is the philosopher who explains that dialectically, under given conditions, an opponent becomes the equivalent of a traitor. This language is the precise opposite of what the powers say. The powers omit the premises and speak more succinctly. They simply say: here there are nothing but criminals. The manichees, who throw themselves into action, understand one another better than they understand the philosopher, for there is a certain complicity among them. Each one is the reason for the being of the other. But the philosopher is a stranger to this fraternal melee. Even if he had never betrayed any cause, one feels, in his very manner of being faithful, that he would be able to betray. He does not take sides like the others, and in his assent something massive and carnal is lacking. He is not altogether a real being.

This difference exists. But is it really between the philosopher and the man? It is rather the difference in man himself between that which understands and that which chooses, and every man, like the philosopher, is divided in this way. There is much that is artificial in the portrait of the man of action whom we oppose to the philosopher. This man of action is himself not all of one piece. Hate is a virtue from behind. To obey with one's eyes closed is the beginning of panic; and to choose against what one understands, the beginning of skepticism. One must be able to withdraw and gain distance in order to become truly engaged, which is, also, always an engagement in the truth. The same author who wrote one day that all action is manichean, having

become involved in action soon after, familiarly answered a journalist who reminded him of what he had said: "all action is manichean, *but don't overdo it!*"

No one is manichean before himself. It is an air that men of action have when seen from the outside, and which they rarely treasure in their memories. If the philosopher helps us to understand, henceforth, something of what a great man says in his own heart, he saves the truth of all, even for the man of action, who needs it, for no real statesman has ever seriously said that he was not interested in the truth. Later on, perhaps tomorrow, the man of action will rehabilitate the philosopher. As for those who are simply men, and not professionals in action, they are very far from classifying all others into the good and the evil, at least as long as they speak of what they have seen, and judge from close up. One finds them, when one looks, to be surprisingly sensitive to philosophical irony, as if it brought their silence and their reserve into the light, because here, for once, the word serves to open and release us.

The limping of philosophy is its virtue. True irony is not an alibi; it is a task; and the very detachment of the philosopher assigns to him a certain kind of action among men. Because we live in one of those situations that Hegel called diplomatic, in which every initiative risks being changed in meaning, we sometimes believe that we are serving the cause of philosophy by isolating it from the problems of the day, and Descartes has recently been honored for not having taken sides between Galileo and the Holy Office. The philosopher, it is said, should not prefer one rival dogmatism to another. He should occupy himself with absolute being beyond both the object of the physicist and the imagination of the theologian. But this is to forget that, by refusing to speak, Descartes also refuses to vindicate and to bring into action the philosophical order in its proper place. By remaining silent, he does not transcend these twin errors. He leaves them at grips with one another; he encourages them, particularly the victor of the moment. To be silent is not the same as to say why one does not wish to choose. If Descartes had acted, he could not have failed to establish the relative right of Galileo against the Holy Office, even if this were finally to subordinate ontology to physics. Philosophy and absolute being are never above the rival errors that oppose each other at any given time. These are never errors in quite the same way, and philosophy, which is integral truth, is charged with saying what in them it is able to in-

tegrate. In order that one day there might be a state of the world in which free thought would be possible, of scientism as well as of imagination, it did not suffice to bypass these two errors in silence. It was essential to speak against, and in this case to speak against the imagination. In the case of Galileo, the thought of physics carried the interests of truth. The philosophical absolute does not have any permanent seat. It is never elsewhere; it must be defended in each event. Alain said to his students: "Truth is momentary for us men who have a short view. It belongs to a situation, to an instant; it is necessary to see it, to say it, to do it at this very moment, not before nor after in ridiculous maxims; not for many times, for there are no many times." The difference here is not between the man and the philosopher. Both of them think the truth in the event. They are both opposed to the important one who thinks by principles, and against the *roué* who lives without truth.

At the conclusion of a reflection which at first isolates him, the philosopher, in order to experience more fully the ties of truth which bind him to the world and history, finds neither the depth of himself nor absolute knowledge, but a renewed image of the world and of himself placed within it among others. His dialectic, or his ambiguity, is only a way of putting into words what every man knows well—the value of those moments when his life renews itself and continues on, when he gets hold of himself again, and understands himself by passing beyond, when his private world becomes the common world. These mysteries are in each one of us as in him. What does he say of the relation between the soul and the body, except what is known by all men who make their souls and bodies, their good and their evil, go together in one piece? What does he teach of death, except that it is hidden in life, as the body in the soul, and that it is this understanding, as Montaigne said, which brings "a peasant and whole peoples to die, just as surely as philosophers?" The philosopher is the man who wakes up and speaks. And man contains silently within himself the paradoxes of philosophy, because to be completely a man, it is necessary to be a little more and a little less than man.

2. WHAT IS PHENOMENOLOGY?

What is phenomenology? It may seem strange that this question has still to be asked half a century after the first works of Husserl. The fact remains that it has by no means been answered. Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'. It is transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science', but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide. Yet Husserl in his last works mentions a 'genetic phenomenology',¹ and

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Preface," *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), pp. vii-xvi. Reprinted by permission.

¹ *Méditations cartésiennes*, pp. 120 ff.