



My Philosophy

By Gordon Marino

PROBABLY THE GREATEST PHILOSOPHER OF THEM ALL, Aristotle proclaimed that philosophy begins with wonder. I wonder. For me it began with football. A marginal player in a Division I program, I went to college primarily to study the gridiron arts and make it to the Elysian fields of the NFL. But I was not just a heavy-footed wide-receiver, I was a contentious kid who enjoyed a good, old-fashioned verbal squabble. If you take “the good, old fashioned” away, we had plenty of them in the home in which I grew up. And so, in the fall of 1971, I signed up for an Introduction to Philosophy class offered by Serge Kappler, a twenty-five-year-old recent Ph.D. from Europe.

A classicist and ancient philosopher by trade, Professor Kappler was an exotic admixture of passion, calm, and unpretentious seriousness. He was also deft at dealing with aggressive and more or less adolescent young men like myself.

Like many of his colleagues, he used Plato and Socrates as the portal to philosophy. Now, if you will forgive a short excursus, Plato composed dialogues in which his teacher, Socrates, was the protagonist. There were many extraordinary aspects of Socrates. He was a war hero. He committed bold acts of civil disobedience. He had a wide swath of followers but did not take compensation for his teaching. But what was most extraordinary about this son of a stonemason was the dialectical method he developed and that revolutionized philosophy.

In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates begins with the assumption that if you desire something such as moral virtue or knowledge, it helps to be able to recognize and define it. After all, how can you search for something when you don’t know what it is? In the dialogue *Laches*, all concur that courage is essential to the good life. But what is courage? One of Socrates’ interlocutors suggests, “courage is not giving ground.” And yet surely a person can be courageous in an illness, and so there has to be more to courage

than holding your place in battle. And then another definition is offered up. More holes discovered, and on it goes. This was the method that Professor Kappler hoped we would appropriate.

But as Plato well knew, this kind of group inquiry requires an atmosphere of warmth and friendship. Socratic truth seekers cannot treat their beliefs as though they are limbs or possessions. Professor Kappler was an artist at creating that amiable classroom spirit, and for me, it was a welcome lesson to learn that friendly disagreements were possible.

This was also one philosophy professor who did not hide from students so that he could work on his next article. He was an object lesson in generosity. Knowing I was a somewhat troubled young man, he and his wife would often have me over to their apartment. One afternoon, we were talking about the nature of philosophy and Professor Kappler observed that for most people, life becomes more and more narrow, even closes down with the years. That resonated with my experience of adults. They seemed to become cynical, spout a few pet theories, and then spend most of their hours away from their jobs either obsessing over their lawns or in front of the great American hearth otherwise known as the idiot box.

Philosophical heavy hitters: Plato, Socrates, Kierkegaard



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“But with philosophy,” Professor Kappler preached, “the process of asking questions is endless and life becomes more and more complex. Life opens up as you get older instead of closing down.” I was hooked, hooked to the point that I started pestering my position coach when he metaphorically speaking pushed us, “to go out there and hurt someone.” “Why,” I asked, “do we need to hurt someone to win a football game?” The coach rolled his eyes and patiently explained that he wasn’t really hoping that we would injure someone, but I was like a kid with a new tool.

THE LIFE OF THE MIND

BEING A MASTERFUL TEACHER and a mentor is a matter of timing. At one point a student will immediately reject a suggestion; at another, after a relationship has been established, he or she will give it serious thought. Later in the year and tapping into my athletic background, Professor Kappler began to make it plain that serious participation in the life of the mind requires rigorous training. He urged me to recalibrate my gridiron ambitions and transfer to a university where I could not easily push classmates around. With his support and the help of a coach, who was, I think glad to unload me, I transferred to Columbia University, where I majored in philosophy.

I had never been around students with the kind of intellectual skills and preparation common at Columbia. It was intimidating, and I often retreated to sports and more secure sources of self-esteem, to say nothing of other less healthy outlets. But after many tumbles and with much assistance, I was able to find my way to graduate school and even into the guild charged with the task of offering instruction on exotic questions such as “what is the good life?” or, “what is the being of being?”

Some students, and parents of students, puzzle over or even ridicule the idea of racking one’s brains on such gauzy problems. In their view, what is important is what is practical, that is, what will land you a job. And being able to systematically reflect on abstract and insolvable issues is not likely to impress prospective employers.

Or is it?

According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, graduates with majors in philosophy compete very well on the job market. And why shouldn’t they? Skills in problem solving, critical thinking, and self-expression are highly desirable, and it is impossible to pass through a philosophy program without developing some of these muscles.

There is more to the case for philosophy. Philosophy emerged in the West with the advent of democracy. In democracies, the acquisition of power has everything to do with being able to persuade others of your views. Likewise, in a government by the people, it would be a great advantage for the citizenry to be able to analyze and evaluate the views advanced by those seeking to steer the ship of state.

Truth be told, I sometimes tire of philosophers more or less assuming they alone can penetrate to the so called “deeper issues” — the issues behind the issues; nevertheless, the study of philosophy does train a person to press questions, to examine basic assumptions. For example, in everything from our foreign policy debates to the fray over health care, the word “freedom” is endlessly bandied about. And yet, for all the work that this god-term does, there is scant reflection on the nature of freedom. Is a person free who has a vote but no bread for his family? How free are you if you cannot get an education? At the very least, training in philosophy makes

people less vulnerable to being manipulated by slogans and appeals to emotions such as fear.

On a more individual level, there is a conviction going back to the Stoics that philosophy is a form of therapy. As Epicurus put it, “Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind.”

I’m in that hobbled group that comes to philosophy with a need to be made whole and to bring my heart’s desires into harmony with reality. For example, I have turned to the Gallileos of the inner world such a Plato, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard to help reconcile with the fact that, over the course of a lifetime, we get pretty attached both to breathing and to people we love. But in this world everything is in flux and destined to go over the falls, into oblivion. How do we adjust our longing for life to the apparent facts of the matter?

The philosopher with whom I keep the most company, Søren Kierkegaard, counsels that like Nicodemus we ought to follow the thread of that longing for eternal life. But then there are Eastern philosophers who teach that we should give up on the hope of anything lasting forever. From that point of view, the Christian tradition, with all of its emphasis on heaven and an unchanging God, is a temptation to cultivate futile and frustrating yearnings for permanence. How to decide between these two alternative life views? Is this choice something that can be resolved by reason?

It’s something to think about...

I think. 🐉

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