

WHY PHILOSOPHY IS EASY

In *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Pt. I, Chap. XXXIV) Maimonides explains why the pursuit of metaphysical knowledge is reserved for the very few and why, even for them, it must not begin until they have reached fullest maturity. The subject, he says, is difficult, profound, and dangerous. He who seeks this knowledge, which is equated with wisdom, must first submit to a long and difficult preparation mental, moral, and physical. Only then can he risk the incomparably more difficult and lengthy ascent to wisdom.

This naturally calls to mind Plato's plan of education in which the highest pursuit, philosophy, is also to be the last in line. With Plato, as with Maimonides, we read that the direct search for wisdom is to be preceded by a certain training of all the natural faculties of man: the body, the emotions, and the intellect.

Note that it is not only wisdom that is so high and so difficult of attainment, and which requires such remarkable preparation. It is also the search for wisdom, the love of wisdom *philosophy*, properly so-called which requires this preparation. And so the question arises: how is it that in the modern era philosophy is no longer difficult in this rather special sense? Has something been gained or lost? Are our sights lower or is our aim better?

To this last question, many perhaps very many modern thinkers would reply that philosophy has simply freed itself from a certain grandiose illusion, and that lowering its sights it has indeed raised them toward what is possible and realistic. Detached from the goals of religion, practical ethics, and therapy, it seeks primarily to *think well* about problems that are most fundamental in human experience and cognition. The modern philosopher, in his philosophizing, no longer loves, i.e., searches for a condition of the self, a new state of being.

It is the abandonment of this objective, more than any single conceptualized point of view, that distinguishes modern philosophy from so much of ancient and medieval philosophy. When Plato speaks of the realignment of the elemental functions of the soul as the goal of the philosopher, when the ancient Skeptics speak of *ataraxia*, the Stoics of an inner collectedness and indifference, and, of course, when so many of the medieval philosophers intertwine the aim of their thinking with the aims of the religious process, they are all speaking and thinking in a language that modern philosophy finds unacceptable. To be sure, there are still very many philosophers who approve these goals as such. It is just that we cannot understand or accept that they are to be attained or sought after in our philosophical activity.

In liberating itself from the influence of theology, modern philosophy sought, of course, to rest itself on the touchstone of experience. By and large, every modern philosophical effort ultimately bases itself on the evidence of experience be it the

experience of existentially crucial situations, the experience of perception, the experience of linguistic usage, the experience of moral decisions, the experience of emotions, or the experience of thinking and judging.

It would be belaboring the obvious to spell out this point in great detail. Certainly, it is no exaggeration to say that, in this sense, common human experience is the touchstone of almost all modern philosophical thought. Experience is something we all have, and we have only to apply our thought in one way or another to the test of experience to determine the rightness or wrongness of our philosophy. Naturally, there are great problems, great difficulties in definition, communication, the assessment of evidence, the selection of experience, etc. But *in principle* we all have the wherewithal with which to test our philosophy. To say of any system or philosophical position that it does not accord with experience is to condemn it beyond redemption.

How could it be otherwise? Yet, in an enormously important sense, it has been otherwise with philosophy. Indeed, it is this emphasis on and trust in our experience which makes modern philosophy easy. The Platonic philosophy is exemplary of philosophy as *difficult* precisely because the appeal to given experience is never the basis of a line of thought. At most, general human experience is used to exemplify a line of thought whose ultimate purpose is to undermine man's reliance on experience.

In fact, it could be said that for Plato and for the others in the tradition that takes philosophy to be difficult man has no experience; or, to put it another way, his experience is not anything like what he imagines it to be. Therefore, the education toward philosophy must involve the acquisition by man of the ability to have genuine experience. The love of wisdom can fully emerge in a man only after he has acquired at least a small degree of this ability. It is, in any case, not something men are born with or which they acquire in the ordinary, general process of maturation and education. Now, what does this mean?

To try to explicate this it will be most helpful here to make use of the Platonic psychology though one could as well use several other ancient or medieval philosophies. Staying with Plato will enable us to put off until later the highly charged issue of the relationship between philosophy and religion. For the moment, what will be explored is the idea that the quality of the true philosopher's experience stands to common human experience much in the way that what we take to be our common human experience stands to the experience of those we call mad.

Consider for a moment what this would mean if it were true. Why, in the plainest possible sense, do we profoundly distrust the experience of the mentally ill? Though this is neither the time or place to go into the various theories of psychopathology, may we not say that, for whatever reason and in the light of whatever psychological theory we adopt, the perceptions and judgments of the mentally ill are to an extraordinary degree ruled by certain powerful fears or desires, of which they are not aware? This is surely the primary element we have in mind when we say of the psychotic that he cannot see reality, that he lives in a dream or nightmare, that he is the slave of his subjectivity, etc.

The mentally ill may, and very often do, think about philosophical problems. In fact, speaking quantitatively of course, there is more philosophical activity on many mental wards than is to be found even in our academic departments of philosophy. Thought, and even systems of thought about the nature of reality, the existence of God, the mind-body problem, the problem of other minds, the concept of goodness, the reality of evil, can be found there in great abundance. And no one who has ever had extensive first-hand acquaintance with the mentally ill will tell you their thought lacks logical consistency and systematic coherence. Of course, their philosophy is bad because their experience is bad. The experience which their philosophy explains is bad experience. And, again, the reason it is bad experience is that their desires and fears govern their power to perceive and judge. For such people philosophy is even easier than it is for us.

For Plato our common human experience is of a similar quality, and his diagnosis of the human condition is, in essential aspects, such as to relegate all men to the insane asylum. As we know, the inner human condition, life in the cave, is described as a state of affairs in which the lower element in man, the multiform desires and fears, rules the higher elements, *thumos* and *nous*. Unregenerate man spends his life as a pawn of these desires and fears (the appetitive element) which themselves do not seek knowledge, but only a sort of gratification much like the scratching of an itch.

This idea of the passive submission to the appetitive is what lies at the basis of Plato's derogation of sensory experience. That is, it is this particular sort of passivity the very opposite of self-mastery that characterizes unregenerate man's sensory life. Man's immediate contact with the world is not just through the senses, but also and equally through the appetitive reaction to the data of the senses. Thus it is not that the senses deceive; it is that the appetitive reaction is not in the interest of truth, but only in the interest of its immediate and with respect to the whole of man partial gratification.

Even so, man's situation would not be so bad were it not that this passive submission to the appetites extends also to the realm of thought and judgment. For here, too, the thoughts that fly through the mind like birds in an aviary are accepted or rejected according to the likes and dislikes that are sourced in the appetitive element. That is to say, the very same part of man which automatically seeks pleasure and avoids pain with regard to the data of the senses also seeks pleasure and avoids pain with regard to the concepts of the mind. This general state of affairs, or condition of the psyche, is termed *doxa*, opinion. With regard to the senses only, it is called *eikasia*, imagination.

But this is not all. Plato tells us that there is in man a certain power or function perhaps, in modern terms, a certain emotional force called *thumos*, the spirited element which, serving the desires and fears, locks man even more deeply in his psychic cave. For without the aid of *thumos* the multitude in the soul could never have the strength simply because it is such a rabble to cause man constantly and passionately to trust in and fight for the goals of this multitude. And this, ironically, in the name of victory, conquest, achievement, hard struggle, devotion, self-realization, or most ironically love.

So that, with *thumos* thus serving the appetites, the force that could help turn the

psyche toward genuine freedom and self-mastery plunges man into the darkness of the double lie or veritable lie, a state of inner deception in which falsehood is passionately and proudly held fast. As Cushman has observed,* here lies the source of *hubris*, false pride: the misdirected *dunamis* of the spirit element in its attachment to the multiform and inconstant appetitive element. In modern terms it might be possible to speak of this as the origin of the ego.

If experience is understood to be that which happens to us, it is clear that from the above perspective all that happens to us or, rather, in us is the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of our appetites. In a way, *nothing* happens to us, to *me*, but only to the multitude in the soul. In such a case, truth becomes that which satisfies one or another of this multitude, and the desire for truth becomes the desire to master reality, rather than to experience it: the desire to obtain pleasure and avoid pain. And thus the ability to have experience becomes the first goal, rather than the unquestioned assumption, of the seeker of truth.

Clearly, the first step towards this ability is the knowledge of ones own condition of delusion. Presumably, this is the first real experience possible for a man whose inner life is in such chaos. That is, the first real experience is the experience that one has no veridical experience. But where in a man can this experience come from? Certainly not the appetitive element, and certainly not the spirited element. Nor from nor in the thought that serves these elements.

In the Platonic psychology real experience can be obtained only through the functioning of the highest element in the psyche, *nous*. Now, the state in which this element can function uninfluenced by the other elements is called *wisdom*. Thus, to realize ones own inability to experience already requires the active functioning of that which *can* experience. And thus, on strictly psychodynamic and structural terms, the Delphic Oracle is vindicated: Socrates *is* wise in knowing his ignorance. Wisdom is a state of being, a condition of psychic organization, and has little, if anything, to do with the lodgment in thought of correct propositions about the universe, man, or even oneself.

Until this reorganization of the psyche has begun to take place, until the experience of certainty which is sourced only in the active functioning of *nous* has been touched, philosophical speculation may be anything but a help toward the attainment of wisdom. For the very idea of what knowledge is and the purpose it may serve is, in unregenerate man, a direct or distant product of his desires and fears. And what he therefore achieves when he achieves satisfying explanations or criticism is to become that much more fixed in the condition of the psyche termed *opinion*.

The search for wisdom *philo-sophia* requires, therefore, a uniquely extensive preparation and is the proximal goal of education. Philosophy is thus, in this sense, not a part of education, but its first end-purpose. If philosophical speculation is presented or given to the appetites, which have their own utilitarian manner of thinking, it may lead to the illusion that wisdom of the ability to know is already present in a man when in fact he may have never had the real experience of certainty about anything, himself or the

universe; and if by chance he has experienced it, this experience will have been used and distorted by the appetites. The whole body of Plato's pedagogical prescriptions may be understood as part of a method that would lead a sufficiently interested man toward this sense of philosophy.

For the philosopher, to know is to experience *via* the activity of the *nous*. And so the age-old philosophical questions become for him directives for possible experiencing. But unregenerate man approaches philosophical knowledge as propositional and deductive and based, of course, on his now questionable experience. To put it another way, the philosopher seeks in the act of thinking to embody with the whole of his psyche the structure of reality. This is, perhaps, the primal sense of the activity of reflection and speculation: a psychodynamic mirroring of the structure of reality. Such a task requires consciousness and, ultimately, control of the appetites which, for their part and in their moment, bring with them standards of satisfaction not necessarily congruent with the laws of the universe. By struggling against a passive submission to the appetitive element, the philosopher in the act of reflecting seeks to incarnate the functional and structural order of the universe.

Obviously, such a goal if accepted prematurely could easily lead to the most preposterous sort of self-inflation, and it is for this reason, among others, that the study of metaphysics is so dangerous. Only a man who has experienced the nullity of his ordinary experience such as Socrates and who can therefore be more or less persistently watchful of himself, could seriously undertake the study of metaphysics, i.e., the perfection of wisdom that leads to a man's inner life mirroring the *entire* scale of cosmic order.

Logical-deductive thought in itself, *dianoia*, may be a useful aid in giving the pupil a taste, so to say, of an activity uninfluenced by the appetites. But precisely because it is removed from the lower elements, it is blind to them. As an activity of the psyche, it requires a severing of parts, not a mastery of the lower by the higher. It requires concentration, a philosophical withdrawal, and cannot, therefore, as an activity, mirror an organic cosmic order. It can serve *any* cognitive purpose and in the hands of an ordinary man it can maintain him in his ignorance at any point blithely withstanding the test of experience and allowing him to move on, unchecked, to consistency and systematic error.

I believe there is a widespread misconception about the roots of Western philosophy. It is often said that Eastern thought differs radically from the mainstream of Western thought in that it does not separate philosophy and religion. That is, there are many who believe that only in the East is the effort to think about the nature of reality inextricably bound up with the project of transforming the nature of man. Certainly this is true of the way Eastern thought differs from modern Western philosophy, by which I mean philosophy since the scientific revolution. And perhaps this is why there has recently been a growing interest in various Eastern philosophies: Buddhism in its several forms, Vedanta, Taoism, etc. But by identifying the whole of Western philosophy with the temper of modern philosophy, one may well read this temper into much of ancient and medieval philosophy. One may fail to sense that its form and method may have been an attempt at a practical embodiment of its discursive content, and that its deepest

purpose was, perhaps, to awaken in the listener or reader the beginnings of a hunger for wisdom in the sense we have described. One may fail to sense this even while spending ones life espousing its content. Just as modern philosophy is easy, so it has, perhaps, become easy to read the ancients.

The separation of the goals of philosophy from the goals of religion may therefore be a typically modern, rather than a typically Western phenomenon. If so, if there is a way of understanding philosophy and religion as tending toward a common goal, then some interesting questions also arise about the modern Western understanding of religion. Is the attainment of wisdom the goal of the religious process? Did Western religion itself change in such a way as to encourage the philosopher to be quite sure he could think more reliably, and ultimately guide his life, without its help? Did it, too, fall away from its primary goals? Finally, was Western philosophy once a religious way, or an essential part of a religious way?

This last question may be, if not answered, at least approached by attempting to place religion as it is known to us in the perspective of our discussion of Platonic wisdom. To do this it will be helpful to expand upon a certain well-known simile concerning the ultimate unity of the various religions of the world:

One often comes across the idea that the various religions are to each other like the spokes of a wheel in that they emanate from a common center; therefore, as one comes to understand any one religion one comes to understand all religion. Let us assume that this center is the state of being or realignment of psychic functions which Plato and others have called wisdom. And let us assume that, with respect to individual men, it is the ultimate task of religion to bring man from his ordinary psychological condition to this state of wisdom.

It may already seem that we are begging the question by assuming this to be the ultimate goal of religion. But, among the things this simile is designed to illustrate is both the particular difficulty of deciding such an issue, and the fact that this extraordinary difficulty is no argument against there actually being a goal that is common to all genuine religion.

Our simile shall be geographical; we locate the center at some point on the surface of the earth, say the top of a particular mountain. Instead of spokes, we shall speak of paths or routes proceeding from a number of locations quite distant both from each other and from the mountain, and which therefore exhibit great differences with respect to climate, terrain, social and biological conditions, and so forth. One path proceeds from the tropics, another from the polar regions, another from the desert, another from a large city. We shall further assume that, compared to conditions on the mountain, the state of wisdom, these other places are bad places: the desert is dry and barren; the jungle dangerous; the arctic cold and isolate; the cities crowded and artificial, and so forth. It is therefore the ultimate task of religion to enable the inhabitants of these places to find their way to the mountain. To this end, certain sets of directions, handbooks, maps, practical advice, and most important guides are made available to the various inhabitants.

Thus, the farther from the mountain, the greater will be the difference in the travel advice. Those starting from the desert, for example, might be told Thou shalt carry great quantities of water, something that might be unnecessary and even a hindrance to those proceeding from the jungle. And the prescription to wear warm clothing would be disastrous to both these groups, whereas it would be a vital necessity to those starting in the polar regions.

A crucial element in this interpretation of religion is already apparent namely, that the primal significance of religious forms (and imperatives) is their *instrumentality*, that their root function is to serve as a means toward psychological transformation. Now, obviously, an effective set of instructions for traveling through a particular region must be based on solid knowledge about the terrain, its dangers, its problems, etc. So that, *for someone who does not wish to leave the region*, these instructions could be taken as ways to improve his life *in* the region. Obviously, much of what would help us travel *out* of the desert could also serve to make life *in* the desert easier or more efficient, *thus reinforcing our satisfaction with where we are*.

There are many ways in which this state of affairs can be translated into the problems of this essay. One that immediately springs to mind is the taking of instrumental formulations as *dogma*, in the modern, pejorative sense of the term. Another possible translation would be the taking of a set of ideas designed to help us change our orientation toward the quality of our experience of the universe as themselves finalistic explanations of that experience. In short, *theology*.

What is being suggested here as a possibility is that dogmatic theology, as we generally understand it, is an instance of transforming the instrumental into the finalistic. An identical situation exists as a possibility with regard to what are termed the moral imperatives of religion. Thou shalt carry water is an imperative only as long as we are in dry places. But if we wish to stay in the desert it becomes an absolute imperative and thereby ceases to work as a help toward bringing us out of the desert.

Let us say that it is this form or stage of religion that modern philosophy rejected. By identifying this level of religion with religion as such it unwittingly lost the possibility of moving beyond that level. For, philosophy's rejection is based, in part, on the idea that it can improve upon the explanations of dogmatic theology. And, in a certain limited sense, perhaps it can. But by seeking only to do better what dogmatic theology seemed to do, it fixes itself at what is only an early way-station on the path to wisdom even, perhaps, while using the word wisdom to express its goal. Thus, there may be even more efficient ways of living well in the desert.

Consequently, philosophy, while detaching itself in this way from a relatively elementary form of religion, remains itself with regard to the actual attainment of wisdom forever bogged down on that same elementary level. No matter how intricate, subtle, or comprehensive its thought becomes, it will never move from that level. And thus, when an even more efficient way of living in the desert comes along Western natural science it

is quick to recognize this as its master, or at least as that to which it must direct most of its energies. From the point of view of the actual attainment of wisdom, the development of philosophy from Descartes through Locke, Hume, Kant, and the contemporary schools thus represents little more than the rationalization of the chains that hold man in the cave. Philosophy becomes easy.

Our simile can be used to express several other things about the religions of the world. For example, to many people one of the most repugnant aspects of some religions is their claim to exclusiveness and the concomitant condemnation of other religions. But if we take this as instrumental, it can become more understandable. If we are living in the desert, then only a certain limited set of directions can help us get out of the desert. To follow an arctic handbook would kill us. Or, seen from another angle, if one considers the psychological and environmental conditions of a certain period and place, the most *useful* imperative might well involve the necessity of submission to some form of authority.

In other conditions, or at a certain point along the way say, when we are safely out of the desert it may be more *useful* to us (as judged by the guide) to try to understand that there are other paths as well. In any event, as the paths get closer to the center, the terrain naturally becomes more and more similar for everyone no matter from whence they started; therefore, the various sets of directions become more alike until, finally, they are all mountain-climbing directions, differing only with respect to the face of the mountain that is being scaled. It is only as one climbs the mountain, however, that one can actually *see* some of the other paths and the people traveling them; only then can one actually verify that the various religions lead to a common center.

Thus, the question as to whether the state of wisdom is the end-purpose of the religions cannot really be decided until one is rather far along towards wisdom. Otherwise, it would mean placing our trust in that quality of experience which it is the first lesson of wisdom to distrust. Consequently, there is no neutral ground upon which to stand in judging either the goals of the religious ways or in comparing the ways themselves. Neutral ground in this case would mean to be on no path at all, i.e., the darkest part of the cave (and, incidentally, the place where philosophy is easiest).

This now brings us to what is perhaps the most important aspect of our whole problem. For one may very well ask, does all this mean we are to surrender our critical faculties, our philosophical methods, our trust in science and in our own moral sense, abandoning all our present intellectual goods, feeble as they may well be when compared to the ideal of wisdom and self-perfection?

One may well ask this, having heard of such notions as the crucifixion of reason, belief by virtue of the absurd, having read of the methods of the Zen Buddhists, and having studied the writings of the great mystics, many of whom seem to exhort us to cast away our rationality, such as it is.

We know, most of us, that we cannot do this. We cannot even wish to do this, not even if we felt able to do so. And not even though we might, somewhere in ourselves,

agree that this rationality by itself may never lead us to a certain quality of thought for which we might have hoped in answer to the fundamental life-questions that first brought many of us to the study of philosophy. Even so, we are not able to give it up.

But perhaps to see this fact about ourselves is already to have glimpsed at a most crucial aspect of *our* condition here and now, one feature, so to say, of our geographical situation. It would be from here, then, that our movement towards wisdom would have to begin; from *here*, and not from some other starting-place where the sacrifice of the mind is required. Just as, on another path, Kierkegaard sought to make Christianity the most difficult thing in the world, so we philosophers may wish to find a way to help us make philosophy more difficult.

* Robert E. Cushman, *Therapeia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), p. 75.