

# *Crashing the Philosophers' Gate*

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IN SPITE OF my clerical gear and the September sun, it was tolerably pleasant to attend the 1933 world's fair in Chicago. Then I took a daring step and entered a Chicago University room where the American Philosophical Association, Western Division, was in session.

I was self-conscious to the nth degree, felt like an intruder and was a little scared. Why the trepidation? I had affidavits in philosophy, for several years had been teaching classes labeled philosophy, had read some, even if in hit and miss fashion, in the masters, and thought I was alive and interested in a few philosophical problems. Why then should I not charge the room where the APA was going about its business? All the same, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes and Kant were scarcely as far off and foreign to this babe in the woods as were the homespun APA people.

A cadaverous beanpole much like myself chanced to be standing at the door. "Oh, surely," he said, "come on in, the sessions are open." If I had only known (1) that his welcome was a bid to a 40-year dialogue with the APA and (2) that the lank redhead was T. V. Smith of Chicago University, one of the highly rated pundits on the APA spectrum, a brilliant expositor of Plato, at times his liberalism flaming as Robert M. Hutchins was to find out, a man not in the least likely to be wowed by the cloth.

This good man simply said, "You're not a member? Do you want to join?" I had never dreamed of such a thing. Among the formalities were recommendations by two members. T. V. volunteered to be my number one sponsor. "Whom else do you know here? No? No one? Oh yes, you do. Here's Professor Robinson of Indiana University, you know him." I did not, but in a moment the greenhorn was taking the first strokes in what to him, despite the weather, were icy waters. Sink or swim.

The fact that on that day I latched unto three highly charged philosophical words, three sifted out of a roomful by natural selection, tells something about me as well as about the assembled wisdom people. The words were, "Dewey himself says." I noticed, too, that it was a let-down when an announcement was made that Dewey, expected at the meetings, could not come.

Back home again in Indiana, the peace and measured stride of myself and others on the Notre Dame campus were changed little by my momentary brush with whatever it was that Dewey said. My confreres and colleagues knew me, and the ensuing reactions finally to "this kind of thing" went in two directions, each of them dictated by the mid-point between cloistered isolation and pluralist dialogue which we were then just beginning to reach in American

Catholic college and university development. One reaction to my escapade was that it was silly and romantic. At any rate, *we* had no need of *them*. Standing pat and pre-pluralistic, we had the truth and rested and gloried in it; the unfortunate others did not believe in truth. This reaction was inadvertently expressed a couple of years later by an official; hearing that I was asked to be on the program of a minor philosophical society, his not idle remark was: "Just make sure that it is Catholic philosophy." A man whom I thought a better judge of men and academia expressed the second reaction. He asked what I was reading; just then it was the American humanists, Irving Babbitt and P.E. More, and he was pleased when in reply to further prodding I said a Catholic university was not limited to the study of Catholics. His generous and open attitude was I think beginning to prevail. It was in the cards that Catholic centers of learning in America would become freer, more pluralistic and inquiring.

But why did this philosophical waif beard the immense Western branch of the APA reaching from Pittsburgh to Denver? To show off at my own school? To flabbergast my students? To go pluralist in sources, methods and contacts and possibly to learn from those philosophers? To teach them? To convert pagans?

I did not know why and do not now know why. But later I got to saying, perhaps to comfort myself, that surely we, meaning philosophers at Catholic schools, then presumed to be Aristotelian-Thomist, had something to learn and something to teach. "What do those others believe, if anything? They're Kantian! They're John Deweyites with his secular 'common faith!'" These shibboleths would scarcely meet the situation. The big lusty APA might or might not have something.

My hit and miss reading in modern philosophy included people like Descartes, Kant and Locke, and I had read bits of contemporaries such as Dewey, Santayana, R. W. Sellars, R. B. Perry, A. E. Taylor, Wilbur Urban, and Samuel Alexander. Although green, I found that I was more conversant with these contemporaries than the rank-and-file APA members were with Gilson and Maritain. A few admired Gilson because he had mastered a great chunk

of history known to them mostly by hearsay. Without study at all, some would condemn Maritain because he was alleged to hold that philosophy could learn from theology.

A good way for an outsider to get relatively inside is to make himself a part of some small philosophy group, and I did meet annually, from I don't know when, with the Indiana association, and from the mid-thirties with the philosophy section of the Michigan Academy of Arts and Sciences, twenty-five to thirty in each, among them E. Jordan, Carroll Hildebrand and Henry Veatch in Indiana, and John Marshall, Friedrich Solmsen and William Frankena in Michigan. A friend from Michigan State and I, and our patient auditors, never did discover for sure why he believed so much less in man and nature than I did.

As if to complement these small gatherings, a professor at Western Reserve (I forget his name) invited some APA members to an initial discussion on teaching philosophy. In my opinion, a good move because it, too, would bring a few philosophers face to face, though I was sure it would soon lapse. Now, operating for over thirty years, it is a prized arm of the APA. At one of our annual confabs, a member told us what her director at an eastern university had told her: that women were not wanted in philosophy, so why wouldn't she, a poet, hire to teach literature, and then infiltrate, turning one chair into another? She did, and everyone was happy ever after. The founder of these rendezvous went to Japan where he taught twenty years and on his return was pleased to find us still discussing how to teach philosophy.

Forty years ago, Catholic universities in America were more isolated than they are now, less pluralist in their faculties, less willing to jump into the mainstream of higher education. I suppose they were and still are an expression of a conscious and healthy subculture. Above all in their philosophy and theology departments they felt that they knew where they stood and they cared little where others stood. In answer to a book which said students go to college to get a philosophy, an old priest said to me, "Good God, man, we have a philosophy!" To say this with umph, the Catholic higher learning was begetting its own associations, in

economics, sociology, theology, and philosophy, the American Catholic Philosophical Association, whose first annual I attended, dating from 1926. These groups had a different set of assumptions than those discernible in the general associations, *e.g.*, the assumption of transcendence, a strong attachment to history and tradition, little taste for innovation and for anything approaching positivism. Catholic separatist groups were not I think the result of a save-the-faith idea, but rather the expression of people moving in their own culture and speaking their own language. Evidence of this situation came out when the ACPA once or twice held joint sessions with the APA; leaders were carefully chosen, topics were tailored, but people could scarcely understand each other. My own experience in a long tenure in the APA was as telltale; I was often in the dark because I did not know the backgrounds and generalized positions of speakers.

An obvious reason for lack of mutual understanding was the fact that until mid-century Catholics though few others got their humanities higher degrees preferably on Catholic topics and at Catholic centers; for philosophy, in Rome, at Catholic University in Washington, at Louvain University, or at St. Michael's College in Toronto. The Roman experience was deadening in philosophy; though highly selected, the trainees seldom showed a continuing or creative interest in philosophy. Under the inspiration and relentless scholarly discipline of Etienne Gilson, St. Michael's College gave a tremendous boost for at least a generation to the quality of philosophical work done in North American Catholic universities, and this was abetted to say the least by the lecturing of Jacques Maritain in North and South American universities, the lecturing and publications of Josef Pieper, and the teaching of Yves Simon at Notre Dame University.

Work under those men demanded first of all a careful study of great texts, notably of Aristotle and Aquinas, a study of patristic and medieval sources, and secondly (and as if incidentally?) an introduction to what Gilson and/or those others thought it justifiable to call "Christian philosophy." This old and ever-new working concept "Christian philosophy" was

well expressed in a prayer by Duns Scotus in the fourteenth century. Setting out to write a book on God, Scotus said that on the ground of the revealed word he already believed that God was Yahweh, Pure Being: "This I believe, but if it be in any way possible, this I would also know."

The late British philosopher Michael Polanyi remarked in 1946 that unless the child believed that the sounds of adults' speech made sense, the child would never learn to speak. In my classes we merely said that, believing such and such to be the case, for example in regard to meaning in the cosmos and/or the destiny of man, perhaps we will have a better chance to understand than if we disbelieved; students composed their own prayers, as if matching those of Anselm and Scotus, and it was a happy moment when a student asked if we would like to hear his version set to music. (Crossing the campus I heard a student consoling a friend: "I would take it philosophically: I wouldn't think about it at all.")

Looking over my long and pleasant tenure in the APA, I am surprised never to have seen among the members anything like an explicit and conscious venturing toward "Christian philosophy," even though, as the erudite and genteel Josef Pieper has shown, all Occidental philosophy is indebted to it, and though many of my fellow-travelling APA philosophers are Jews or Christians and live by religious beliefs.

It seems to me that the basic Aristotelian idea of a natural teleology, the idea that nature at least in man and in all sublunar life is tending toward ends, has also been soft-pedaled in the APA; and when a member read to the APA a documented paper saying that American naturalism was hurting because it skipped natural teleology (which a character in Updike calls "the teleologic bias in things"), I wondered how many the paper convinced.

In the long run, what comes of all this good-timing with philosophers? For one thing, we may see our own assumptions better, that is to say the grounds or principles that we take for granted and rarely notice although these assumptions may really be dictating the positions which we consider rockbottom. For instance, we may be unconsciously assuming that:

- (a) it is allowable
- or (b) it is better
- or (c) it is best
- or (d) it is alone possible

to proceed on a wholly secular hypothesis. Of course, others may be philosophizing on a contrary assumption. A philosophy association or department may be made up of people some of whom are dictated to by one of these sets of assumptions, and others by the quite divergent set, but they can understand each other and allow for each other. When the APA, Western Division accepted an invitation to meet in 1942 at Notre Dame University (an annual wiped out by the war), some members from church-related colleges said: "We're glad! It's about time!" Those members, and possibly they were many, felt that even in regard to meeting places, the secular assumption had ruled the roost. And when in 1958 Professor Schilpp of Northwestern, our incoming president, asked me to serve on the program committee—an honor, much work—a Jesuit from St. Louis University was elated; seemingly he had assumed that the secular and the transcendent are twain and ever more shall be so.

One may at least be able to notice that certain issues are not raised at all. Even as a possible working concept, "Christian philosophy" is unpopular. Why refuse also to waste

time on what Louis J. A. Mercier of Harvard called the "half-way house" of American humanism? The Swedish scholar, Folke Leander, attending an APA annual, Western Division, was disappointed: he could find scarcely one member who had any knowledge of or interest in the "inner check" problem wrestled with by Irving Babbitt; or (I may say) in the problem of standards for art, morals and education as raised and repeatedly raised by Babbitt. Again, beginning in the early 1930's and stepped up in part by some careless assertions in Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, a reaction, to last at least a generation, set in among many American anthropologists, including Linton, C. Kluckhohn and Redfield, against a sheer relativism in morals. This reaction was forcibly stated in Kluckhohn's "Ethical Relativism *Sic et Non*" (*Journal of Philosophy*, 1955). Why have the APA members spent so little time on the implications and relevance of the cultural, ethical and panhuman universals voluminously cited by those and other anthropologists?

On the personal side, I am happy to record that most people took me, a waif and stray, simply for granted and paid little if any attention to me. My presence became so routine and casual that it was pleasant though a surprise to hear an APA member in good standing use my name in a discussion: "Ward says." The gate had long since been crashed.