Philosophical Pluralism in the Service of Humane Governance

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, the American Philosophical Association has been exposed in a serious way to the issue of pluralism in philosophy curriculums in the departments of philosophy of American universities and colleges. This conversation brings to the fore the fact that what is at issue in the prospect of pluralizing American philosophy departments is not merely the matter of deciding the discipline's boundaries of intellectual formation relative to the current generation of students, but the unforeseeen consequences of pluralism which challenge both 'the American canon' and the profession's self-understanding vis-à-vis a 'Western' intellectual heritage that distinguishes the 'essential' from the 'marginal' by privileging essential figures, problems, and time-honored methodological commitments. Yet, to the degree that there is a quest for relation of differences, this need not presuppose the universality of philosophical discourse, comparative philosophy moving inevitably within a logic of opposition rather than a logic of mutuality. Our thinking is surely problematic if at this World Congress we find an occasion for a confrontation between 'the West' and 'the margin,' the latter construed negatively as a 'mute, growing and menacing pressure.'

In recent time the American Philosophical Association has been exposed in a serious way to the issue of pluralizing the philosophy curriculum in the departments of philosophy of American universities and colleges. John Lachs, Philip Quinn, John Stuhr, and Kathleen Wright each contributed thoughtful discussions to the "issues in the profession" section of the November 1996 Proceedings and Addresses.(1)

As Lachs observed, there are those who conceive pluralism to mean "due representation of the analytic, Continental, and American philosophical traditions". Others who have explicit concern with the developing "sub-discipline" of comparative philosophy conceive pluralism to include "work in the complex traditions of Chinese, Indian, African, Latin American, Islamic, Jewish, feminist, and Native American thought, as well".

Quinn perhaps speaks for a majority of philosophers when he suggests that hardly anyone would deny that "it is a good thing to expose students to the many ways in which philosophy has been done in various places and at different times", that "it is a good thing to carry forward philosophical inquiry in the many traditions that have proved to be of enduring value". Thus Quinn favors a more inclusive pluralism, one which "would consist of a conversation that contains many more non-Western philosophical voices". Notwithstanding Quinn's hopeful

remarks, Stuhr noted that today pluralism is not widely endorsed. Drawing a telling analogy, Stuhr observed that the "captains of the academy claim that philosophy departments, unlike Noah, must leave behind, for example, the frogs and bears in order to take on a couple more hedgehogs and bats (and in so doing perhaps become the leader of the hedgehog and bat thought and the institutional dream destination, at least with tenure thrown in, of hedgehogs and bats everywhere)". Still other opponents of pluralism, says Stuhr, "claim that it now threatens to overturn "our" western intellectual tradition, "our" cultural heritage, and "our" classics of philosophy (hedgehog and bat, even frog and bear, philosophy) in a politically correct effort to serve the demands of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition".

The foregoing observations bring to the fore the fact that what is at issue in the prospect of pluralizing American philosophy departments is not merely the matter of deciding the discipline's boundaries of intellectual formation relative to the current generation of students. At issue are those unforeseen consequences of pluralism which challenge "the American canon", which challenge a profession's self-understanding vis-a-vis a "Western" intellectual heritage that distinguishes the "essential" from the "marginal", privileging essential figures, essential problems, and time-honored methodological commitments. Yet, to the degree that there is a quest for relation of differences, this need not presuppose the universality of philosophical discourse, comparative philosophy moving inevitably within a logic of opposition rather than a logic of mutuality. Our thinking is surely problematic if at this World Congress we find an occasion for a confrontation between "the West" and "the margin", the latter construed negatively as a "mute, growing and menacing pressure, on the enclosure of Western collocution".(2)

The concern for "subversion" of this intellectual heritage smacks, tacitly if not explicitly, of what Derrida has called "metaphysical racism", a charge which, in its initial context, is associated with Husserl's views about the crisis of the European sciences and of Western humanity's inalienable role in extricating us from that crisis.(3) For Husserl, philosophy, "vital" philosophy, struggles for its own true and genuine meaning and, thereby, for the meaning of a genuine humanity. At issue for Husserl is a fundamental decision: "to decide whether the telos which was inborn in European humanity at the birth of Greek philosophy — that of humanity which seeks to exist, and is only possible, through philosophical reason, moving endlessly from latent to manifest reason and forever seeking its own norms through this, its truth and genuine human nature — whether this telos, then, is merely a factual, historical delusion, the accidental acquisition of merely one among many other civilizations and histories, or whether Greek humanity was not rather the first breakthrough to what is essential to humanity as such, its

entelechy."(4)

As I noted elsewhere, for Husserl the entelechy of Europe "holds sway throughout all the changing shapes of Europe", inasmuch as "the particular telos of particular nations and of individual men is contained in the spiritual telos of European humanity". Husserl's point finds its expression in a single statement: "Within European civilization, philosophy has constantly to exercise its function as one which is archontic for the civilization as a whole".(5) The idea that Europe and European philosophy are archontic for "humanity", for what may properly be conceived as "the ends of humanity", is surely suspect in the way in which Derrida calls it a "metaphysical racism".(6) Yet, notwithstanding our suspicions, there is something more or less "matter of fact" to the later Heidegger's remarks which are consistent with Husserl's concern for the status of the Western philosophical enterprise. "Western history", Heidegger observes, has been undergoing a "broadening out into world history", issuing in the global hegemony of the Western valuation: "The end of philosophy means: the beginning of the world civilization based upon Western European thinking."(7) This is the fundamentally decisive event of "closure" to the Western tradition of metaphysics, Western categories of reason determining the essential features of "world" civilization. It is in acknowledgement of this ongoing historical process that Husserl's claims about "entelechy" are manifestly to be taken seriously, even as we may in the same moment dispute the ontological and epistemological bases and moral implications of this idea. The contemporary Western philosophical scene remains one in which themes of crisis are pervasive. All teleological, eschatological, ousiological, and even aletheological "systems", conceived as foundational quests, are now "trembling" so as to call into question any meaningful fundamentum absolutum et inconcussum. If philosophers yet stand amidst this trembling, they cannot but raise the more fundamental question about how they really stand at the juncture of philosophical and political responsibility.

It is in terms of this latter question that I would recommend we construe the issue of pluralism in the American academy. Philosophers do have a responsibility before the historical generation with which they are bound; and this responsibility is inescapably both philosophical and political. At a time when the nation-state system and its governing logic of statecraft (with all of its attendant imaginary geography) are being challenged by both gradualist and radical approaches to global reform, the American philosophical community can be negligent of its philosophico-political responsibility only at the risk of severe indictment from generations present and future for a fundamental moral failure. Ours are times in which world-order scholars would have us attend not only to the practical problems of transforming international institutional structures and patterns of behavior. We are called upon by world-order scholars

also to assist with the demands of thinking even radically about the possibilities of global governance, thus to think with them the task of transforming the fundamental philosophical orientations or sets of values which, relative to the nation-state system, are system-maintaining, system-diminishing, or system-transforming.(8) 'Philosophy' construed narrowly, i.e., in terms that at their best represent fallacies of appeals to traditional wisdom and parochialism and at worst amount to the more serious charge of metaphysical racism, cannot but fail to meet the really urgent dimension of philosophical responsibility. This urgent dimension of philosophical responsibility, I suggest, is not simply one of yielding before the fashionable pressures of political correctness and the politics of recognition. Rather, this responsibility is to be comprehended in terms of the contemporary quest for a just and humane world order.

Alasdair MacIntyre has instructed us in recent time about the Western "tradition" bequeathing to us the contemporary "scene of radical conflict" — a scene in which appear rival conceptions of justice and competing rationalities, all of them "disguised by a rhetoric of consensus".(9) Philosophical pluralism narrowly conceived by the American academy captures this empirical fact, even as we have — and are expected to have — due representation of analytic, continental, and pragmatist conceptions of justice and rationality. We may, therefore, have cause for concern that we as philosophers find ourselves unable, as MacIntyre put it, "to unite conviction and rational justification"; that we end up with "allegiance to the dominant intellectual and cultural modes of the present order"; and, thus, that one way or another we commit ourselves to "the rational superiority" of a particular theoretical structure which remains historically contingent. Yet, as MacIntyre went on to argue, "acknowledgment of the diversity of traditions of inquiry, each with its own specific mode of rational justification, does not entail that the differences between rival and incompatible traditions cannot be rationally resolved".(10) Accordingly, faced with ontological and epistemological features of crisis which are recognized and acknowledged in terms of the Western tradition's internal intellectual diversity, philosophy may now become genuinely comparative. Western philosophy has long esteemed itself as doing its work along the lines of rational persuasion, thus to preempt the conduct of human affairs by way of the arbitrary tyranny of brute power. At a time when the appropriate metaphor for our common human predicament is ambiguous — "spaceship Earth", "lifeboats adrift", "global village" — the art of persuasion perhaps remains the one avenue along which a genuinely historical confrontation of traditions is possible. World-order scholar Ali Mazrui, contributing many years ago a cultural perspective on world order, offered for our consideration the claim that persuasion is "the art of influencing mutually familiar

predispositions", given that "the ability to convince another person about a new idea requires a common universe of discourse".(11) Mazrui held out for our consideration the prospect that cultural convergence in the international system may — indeed, should — evolve into an infrastructure for consensus. For now the world community is faced with cultural asymmetry, i.e., with an emerging world culture which is primarily Eurocentric, so that the prospect of global cultural convergence requires of us what Mazrui calls "ideological agnosticism". I wish to suggest here that comparative philosophy, viewed positively, is an invitation to just such ideological agnosticism, and thereby points out for us the way ahead in the direction of a planetary thinking.

Despite our Derridean suspicions of metaphysical racism, Husserl may have been right that in struggling for its own true and genuine meaning philosophy thereby struggles for the meaning of a genuine humanity. Working from a position or posture of ideological agnosticism, comparative philosophy promises to expand (rather than to collapse) our horizon of inquiry and understanding. Even as we may grant (with Derrida) that language is itself already a polemos, the art of persuasion need not be irremediably transgressive. On the contrary, in the absence of our articulating and engaging our treasured conceptions, in the absence of our owning mutually familiar predispositions, we will make no progress towards the normative convergence that enables planetary dwelling. Thereby, we will make no progress towards the creation of a just world order. Worse, we shall own no enduring achievement of the human spirit in our common struggle for the meaning of a genuine humanity. Assuming these are legitimate desiderata in any relevant conception of world order, we as philosophers have much work yet to do. And, we can, therefore, unreservedly welcome philosophical pluralism into the American academy for its promise to serve all of us in the noble quest for humane governance.

Notes

(1) See John Lachs, "What Constitutes a Pluralistic Philosophy Department?", Philip L. Quinn, "Pluralism in Philosophy Departments", and John J. Stuhr, "Fundamentalism and the Empire of Philosophy: What Constitutes a Pluralist Department?", Kathleen Wright, "Pluralism on the Undergraduate Level: The Case of Haverford College", Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. 70, No. 2, November 1996, pp. 167-187. The printed articles are the substance of a panel discussion sponsored by the Metaphysical Society of America and the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, held at the Eastern Division meeting of APA, December 28, 1995.

(2) Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man", in K. Baynes, et.al., After Philosophy: End or

Transformation? (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 125-158

(3) See Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), Section 6 of Part I, "The history of modern philosophy as a struggle for the meaning of man", pp. 14 ff.

(4) Husserl, ibid., p. 15

(5) See Husserl's "Vienna Lecture" of May 1935, Appendix I in The Crisis of European Sciences. For related remarks, see my "Gnothi sauton: Heidegger's Problem Ours", Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, Vol. 25, No. 3, October 1994, pp. 263-287

(6) Jacques Derrida, Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question, trans. G. Bennington & R. Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 120-122.

(7) Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'", in The Question Concerning Technology, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 104; and Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking", On Time and Being, trans. J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 59.

(8) See my "Planetary Politics and the Essence of Technology: A Heideggerian Meditation", Dialogos, 70, July 1997, pp. 147-179

(9) Alasdair MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988)

(10) Ibid., pp. 9-10

(11) Ali A. Mazrui, A World Federation of Cultures (New York: The Free Press, 1976), p. 1