## 4 PM - 1940s On history and philosophy after WWII

"If the 1940s showed one thing, it was that the hamburger of history can be cut many ways, many probably valid, but validity does not necessarily imply usefulness. Epochs can be political, economic, social, literary, and even musical. If cutting the hamburger one way makes no sense, then cut again to find something more useful."

"Do such artificial periods matter?"

"Contemporary popular music mirrors the culture as much as the literature does, but it seems to have ten year periods, changing around the fourth year of the decade—1944, -54, -64, -74, -84 and so on. In the middle of the 1940s the 45-RPM single was invented, followed closely by the 33-1/3 RPM long playing record. Music blossomed as it fit the new formats' ease and accessibility. Driven by so simple an invention, patterns of human association changed, as they did later in the mid-1950s when the transistor arrived on the scene, making music more portable. Such distinctions help us understand.

"Periods for the novel over the last century seem fuzzier. When did Modernism begin? Was it with Henry James and Joseph Conrad before 1900? Was it after the horror of World War I? Was it, in the early 1920s when Virginia Woolf cavalierly asserted that on or about December 1910 human nature changed?

"Modernism's metamorphosis to Post-modernism may have begun at the cocktail parties of the 1920s where worries were amplified by an onslaught of new media like radio and talking motion pictures infatuated with style over content—and where artists drowned their concern over the failure of literature to anticipate and prevent the horrors of World War I. Joyce straddled Modernism and Post-modernism. *Ulysses* tried to





represent consciousness using a dramatic stylistic break with what preceded it. His *Finnegan's Wake* completed the leap to style. Overlapping Modernism, Post-modernism looked to replace it with better substance. Finding little, Post-modernism settled with sarcastic polishing of style instead. Meanwhile, under assault from philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, the stability of language was slipping away. Waves of Nietzsche-like desperation washed over academia, expressed by existential philosopher Jean Paul Sartre in 1949. Sartre's generation concluded that the war had destroyed any plausible intellectual framework, a realization that led to a 1950s sulk. They were not stuck with a fine kettle of fish, but with a kettle that was philosophically empty."

"What did that mean for you, growing up then?"

"Insulation from what happened. World War I, the war to end all wars, had been supplanted by an even worse war. And those who lived through the war decided they were going to protect their children from ever having to face either the want of the depression or the horror of war again. Except for cleansed television versions of *The Big Picture* and *Victory at Sea*, they hid the horror of war and famine from their children. Along the way, they also hid from them the substance of what was worth standing up for and why. They left an entire generation unprepared intellectually to defend itself—not by design, mind you, but by misplaced compassion. Nothing filled the vacuum that remained after order broke down. When students asked 'why' in class, unable to answer, the teachers could only rap knuckles with their rulers and say 'Because I said so!'

"Life kept them busy enough. Maybe we didn't need anything in the philosophical kettle. If we pretend to our children, they won't know the kettle is empty, and substituting authority, prudishness, and Sunday school, may suffice. They were wrong, but they did what they did out of consideration for us; that we might never have to relive their horror."

"Is the kettle really empty?"

"No. For example, I did find Confucius early on, but well after I had been exposed to Socrates and Plato in the then impenetrable academic collegiate way."

"How can you like Confucius. He believed in a patriarchal society. Look what that did over the millennia for China."

"That confuses the philosopher with philosophy. Don't confuse Confucius with the religion Confucianism and with religious institutions later created in his name. That's like confusing the ideas of Jesus with the beliefs codified by his disciples and those further confused with any of the hundreds of orthodox churches that claim him as their founder. The philosopher can be quite different than what successors develop.

"More to the point, don't discard any sound ideas Confucius might have expressed because he also came up with a clunker or two. You have an advantage on Confucius, who had to think in ancient Chinese, limited as it was 2500 years ago, and without benefit of 2500 extra years of history and the genius of other more recent great thinkers. Seek out across history the golden threads that still work."

"Do you deduce golden threads that are then confirmed by others in history or do you confirm yourself the threads that others have arrived at?"

"I am obliged to look at history through my experience, but others' experience colors mine. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

"What do Confucius and those early Greek philosophers share in common?"

"Confucius believed there were three kinds of people: saints, who intuitively knew 'the way' to behave—called *li* in Chinese; others who could learn how to behave—and he considered himself one of those; and a third group who could never learn the way but who needed instead fixed laws he called ritual.

"Socrates, a contemporary of Confucius, who lived half a world away, was recorded by his pupil Plato to have believed that character could be taught, but not by rote like geometry. Plato's student, Aristotle, believed 'the way' for him was to be a realist in





philosophy who tries to conform his mind to the way things are. He wanted his mental map of reality to be accurate.

"Aristotle was brilliant for his time. But, today, given our vocabulary, habits, and experience, we can know more than Aristotle could possibly know—if we learn from experience and look around. Perhaps Aristotelian ethics were limited by his approach as a biologist. Taxonomy is his creation—he observed nature and then classified patterns he saw. For Aristotle virtue was the mean between two extremes—the extremes being vices. For example, courage was the mean between the vices of the emotions boldness and fear. Aristotle's insight came from analyzing what he saw rather than deducing how it came about, which set limits on what he could know."

"What limits?"

"It's as if he saw his specimen in the abstract, dissected and labeled it, and, he did not consider the relevance of the specimen being outside its natural environment. When the specimen is isolated it is hard to deduce how it evolved."

"For Aristotle, virtue is taking one's particular rationality and developing it well. Finding our own virtuosity, as it were. For both Confucius and Aristotle, rationality seems to be process-oriented at a time when people did not see things as process. For them, virtue seems to be more than a habit but they seem not to be able to do more than detect an underlying fabric.

"Why is it important to know how ethics evolved?"

"Why it exists matters as much as what exists. Over 2500 years people have unsuccessfully tried different approaches. Aristotle would have us get our mind to conform to the way the world works through the exercise of intellectual virtues:

- Science (*episteme*)—Understanding cause and effect or theory to explain effects
- Art (*techne*)—How to make things
- Prudence—Good judgment; knowing how to find the mean and act
- *Nous*—Ancient Greek for mind, intuition, and self

"For Aristotle, freedom came from knowing one's options and choosing for oneself, a view taken up centuries later by Saint Augustine. Aristotle believed all creatures have natures and the virtue of each was to exercise that nature well. St. Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle's belief that humanity's nature led to natural law. He believed four cardinal virtues were revealed in nature: prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude."

"Renaissance humanism changed that outlook, prompted by explorations that reinforced otherness. For rationalist philosophers like 17th century's John Locke and John Toland, the ways to know (Aristotle's equivalent to *episteme*) were sense experience, reflection, testimony, and scripture. Suspicious of the priest's craft, Toland put religion at the edge of civil government so not to allow religion an escape from the reins of reason. Voltaire was haunted by the 1572 St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in France, where thousands died for no reason other than their religion.

"In his 'Dictionary,' Voltaire said the Enlightenment's goal was to change the way people think about their world. Enlightenment was domination giving way to liberty. Joseph Priestly considered the Enlightenment an opportunity to see what men are and see what yet they can do."

"Where does ethics fit in?"

"Scots philosophers of the 1700s considered ethical behavior detached from religion and also recognized the limitations of reason. Early in the century, Bernard Mandeville's poem *The Fable of the Bees* took exception to the classical definition of a virtue as that which benefits the rest of society. He believed what benefited the individual could also benefit others. Shortly after that Francis Hutcheson wrote that virtue was what served the public good. He believed mankind is naturally social benevolent, that moral sense is part of human nature, and that sentiments and judgments matter. Their intentions may have been good, but that definition of virtue presents too many problems. In the middle 1700s another Scot, David Hume, a utilitarian influenced by John Locke and George Berkeley, used Newtonian arguments to suggest reason was imperfect, but useful, along





with experience, as a check on sentiments. Reason is and ought to be a slave to passions."

"Is something a virtue because it promotes the public good?"

"That's too sweeping. Would building a new Yankee Stadium be a virtuous action? Would consigning people to sit idle under welfare be virtuous?"

"No on both counts."

"Adam Smith acted like an anthropologist to examine how people decide in practice. Smith's notion was that people learn to do morality by judging others and then internalizing the lessons learned. Smith, like Hutcheson, felt that people could be capable of distancing themselves from their internal sentiments. Adam Ferguson tried to combine Hume's benevolent civic interest and Smith's sympathy into the law of society. He believed man is a social being, and mankind was working toward perfection. He did worry, along with Montesquieu, that liberty would become considered ordinary and inconsequential and that people would lose their liberty as a result of their passivity. He foresaw danger from too much order rather than too little of it.

"Thomas Reid, a Scottish contemporary of Hume and Smith, believed common sense was an important tool for moral development. He bypassed other unanswerables about what one can know that vexed philosophers. Reid understood that what mattered was that different people could agree on some principles. 'For, before men can reason together, they must agree in first principles; and it is impossible to reason with a man who has no principles in common with you.'"

"Immanuel Kant objected to Reid's conclusions."

"While Kant put limits on reason, he believed that morality arises within oneself. It is not imposed from outside as in natural law or a set of scriptures. Significantly, what works for an individual fits comfortably with what other individuals will deduce, given the opportunity. Kant championed reciprocity. Man is not a means to an end, but an end into himself. That's why Kant believed one should never lie, since each individual is owed the most accurate mental map possible of the universe."

"But Kant fell out of favor."

"The whole Age of Enlightenment that sought to empower individuals fell out of favor after 1789 when reactionaries masquerading as a new age of romanticism misled the masses, demeaning the value of reason. Individualism and reason have remained out of favor for two hundred years. Most people consider themselves guided by reason but the political classes repeatedly manipulate what passes for reason to stay in power."

"Philosophy seems removed from everyday life."

"That's been the trend since G. W. F. Hegel in 1800 advocated historical relativism weakening the place of ordinary individuals in society. Marx in the 1840s reinforced the notion that outside forces rule. A long string of philosophers since Nietzsche, in the 1880s, have been either anti-free will or focused on structure. Fernand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida all challenged knowing and being—epistemology and ontology—with Freudian unconscious determinism. And to what end? Since one can never know whether the will is free or not, one might as well act as if it is, given the complexity of self-reflection, exercised across infinitely recursive levels, interacting with innumerable others."

"Philosophy seemed to wander without a moral compass."

"On the other side of the philosophical tug of war were turn-of-the-century pragmatists lake William James, a follower of Charles Sanders Pierce, who believed something is true if it works. John Dewey, a staunch advocate of democracy, pushed that view in his progressive educational program. In the 1970s, John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* proposed that 'most reasonable principles of justice are those everyone would accept and agree to from a fair position' and Richard Rorty said truth was a word for what a culture determined was useful. But popularity is subject to manipulation and what 'works' depends upon the yardstick. To support democracy because it is popular misses its real advantage—the potential to foster processes of thorough, ongoing discussion. Popularity is a stop-think word. Popularity often disguises social thuggery. Emancipatory social changes





pushed because they are popular too often lead to unintended results that delay the very goals they wish to achieve.

"In the late 1970s, when *Orientalism* author Edward Said's trendy multi-cultural views preoccupied progressives, Rorty wrapped the structuralists' irony around the pragmatists' preoccupation with ends to advocate a popular recycled Marxian utopian platitude that all people are the same and deserve to be treated the same. That led to the notion our cultural behavior might cause adversarial misbehavior in others if they misunderstood us or mistook our intentions. If we are all the same, we need only act nice and lower our defensive posture to bring peace to the world. Rorty's feel-good relativist notion overlooks Karl Popper's advice that the purpose of science is to prune away the demonstrably false. What remains, while not verified, is not relative and deserves attention. People may be built the same, but some would kill us for the smallest justification. As easily as different and dangerous programs might infect computers, similar ideas can infect people to keep them from recognizing and embracing the minimum requirements for society that most people otherwise would find easily accessible."

"Then why mention Rorty at all?"

"Rorty deserves credit. Thousands of college students who drudge through Philosophy 101 never reach Rorty's conclusion that each generation has the responsibility to take the best of what has gone before and validate it for itself using the best tools currently available. If one cannot take a philosopher's word for truth, you must become your own philosopher. Robert Nozick, a contemporary of Rawls from the other side of the political spectrum, encouraged such independence, because people own themselves. The state does not own people.

"To rediscover philosophy for everyday life, go back to Thomas Reid. The essential task of everyday life for individuals is to engage others to establish a reliable fabric for interaction—not by force, religion, culture, or presumed eternal principles, but by common sense working on experience. Along the way, that continuous process inoculates you to defend yourself from those

who would harm you, even if they may sometimes operate under the guise of the state."