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Michael McGhee

Excerpt

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Introduction

Listen, wisdom is something dared, and what matters beyond all else in philosophy, which is the love of wisdom, is a spirit of inwardness, which you have to cultivate for yourself, a practice of inner silence, even before reflection, which philosophy is thought to start with. Inwardness lets in another possibility, a new position from which what had seemed the very terms of reflection can come to be reflected upon. It is a moment of philosophy, therefore, before analysis, which it then inspires, but if it is absent analysis is sterile.

Philosophy is also a conversation, and what matters beyond all else here is demeanour, how we listen, how we speak or write, not seeking dominance, not indifferent to the well-being of the other, but encouraging inwardness, a friendly, even an 'erotic' spirit, and we have to learn when thinking can be shared, when its communication can only be indirect, and when we have to stay silent.

This is a record of conversation and self-inquiry, conversation with teachers and friends, and between a younger and an older self, in which my past has corrected my present, I hope, as much as my present has my past. One may be ashamed of a younger self, but also be shamed by it. I began this piece of writing in 1982, in the midst of a period of personal disarray and a few months before the Falklands/Malvinas conflict. Some may be disconcerted by sudden shifts of temporal location, but I do not apologise for the way in which ideas assert and reassert themselves over long periods of time and in different contexts. The readers I have addressed, sometimes half-consciously, reflect a progress, strangers who have looked at me askance and disapproving, or companions, travelling mostly at night, when there is more to see, when the presence or absence of clouds matters and is not conformable to the will, or so it seems, until the will alters or subsides, and there everything is, quite visible, then disappears again. I have revealed more of myself than is usual in British books of philosophy, books in which the person of the

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author is often not there, at least not consciously, as what must also be shown. The intrusion, as it may appear, of the states of my own subjectivity, will be judged a lapse of taste by some, and they may be right, though I believe that these ‘contrary states’ set limits on what I can do as a philosopher. But in treating of yourself, ‘how can you generalise the one case so irresponsibly?’ Well, one has to gamble that ‘the one case’ turns out representative, take the same risks as the poet. It will be found so, or not.

Philosophy, the love of wisdom, but what does that cant, that pious, phrase mean? Love of something we know? And if not, how can we love what we do not know? We have to define it by contrast, by the *endurance* of non-wisdom, as it were, the palpable sense of ignorance and delusion, sudden sense but mostly darkness, and perhaps something answers to a longing and perhaps not. My late teacher, Peter Winch, wrote a book called *Trying to Make Sense* (1987), a pregnant title, poignantly illustrated on its cover by Magritte’s *Les Amants*, trying to say to another what one can hardly say to oneself: in making sense one emerges as a person into the world, though it takes another to receive it: ‘are even lovers powerless to reveal / To one another what indeed they feel?’ And it suggests a perplexity, a trying to *understand* that there is genuinely something there, not yet available to our condition, and an attempt at *making*, at *poiesis*, language something that we build out of the right silence, sense something we make, – *jäher Sinn*, a sudden sense – as we come to a new understanding of things, formerly concealed, an understanding that coheres at the point of expression only, after enduring *aporia*, living with no sense of a road ahead, and then there it is again, the sign of a path. My talisman is Keats’s *Negative Capability*, defined in a letter to his brothers in 1817 as ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. Some philosophers reach very quickly and very irritably after fact and reason, but maybe we have to learn from the poets, if we are to *make* sense. Winch is associated with Wittgenstein and Simone Weil, and I have learnt a great deal from, come on, I have been *formed* by, the work of all three of them. But what you learn or need to learn depends on where you started, and though this is a book of philosophy it also (it *thereby*) reflects a laborious, slow progress, a day-labouring sometimes, Wirral, the Mersey and Liverpool, the Dee, the Welsh hills in the distance, hares started in the fields below Storeton Woods, the fifties, a grim, penitential and authoritarian Catholicism, seminary, philosophy and the loss of faith and years of teaching, a slow transition, to Buddhist practitioner,

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not ‘believer’, for my emphasis is on the interior conditions of action rather than on *belief* or, worse, ‘conviction’. But the introduction of Buddhism renders transcultural the canon of reference and possible inspiration, and is a sign of the times, as we enter an Interculture, the only help against the destructive values that have accompanied the global market. So I have been addressing ‘thinkers’, philosophers, theologians and Buddhist scholars, specifically perhaps those concerned to make sense, if not of religion then of spirituality. I have tried to make sense of an alien but compelling Buddhism in terms of western thought, and to look again at western thought in terms of Buddhism, in terms, that is, of a Buddhist *naturalism*. I have followed the trail of those who have returned to the Greeks, in my case to Plato, finding a troubled, human philosopher. My understanding of Plato, such as it is, has developed in response to Nietzsche. I have felt forced to move backwards and forwards between them, impressed by both, trying to adjudicate, trying to reconcile. The form of my personal life, which I so irresponsibly generalise, has forced me at the same time towards reflection on the relations between reason, feeling and sensuality, and on the Greek virtue of *enkrateia* or self-control and the vice of *akrasia* or lack of control, in a way which I hope brings the two sets of themes into convergence. Thus I have also discovered meaning in the virtue of *sophrosune*, which seems to be like self-control, which is in fact its imitation and beginnings. *Sophrosune* has been translated sometimes as ‘self control’, which is unfortunate, but more often as ‘temperance’. I have tried to connect it with, to illuminate it by, the Buddhist virtue of mindfulness (*smṛti samprajanya*) since it seems to me that ‘temperance’, as a relaxed relation to desire and appetite, is rather a concomitant of *sophrosune* than the thing itself. Aristotle offers an etymology and tells us that it ‘protects wisdom’ (meaning ‘practical wisdom’, the capacity for undistorted judgement and unimpeded right action, *phronesis*) and so I have associated it with the practice of meditation and the virtue of mindfulness, both of which have an outcome for the *body*, its states of energy, our relation to it. Meditation or *dhyana* has an effect on the body as well as upon the mind, upon the one being, and that has led me to think in terms of a ‘dhyanic’ or a ‘dhyanicised’ body. So, I have approached ‘the spiritual life’ non-theistically, beginning from a position, which I share with others, of post-Christianity. But that is where I came to and then moved on from. My Christianity dissolved, at length, but it was a degenerate form, from another time than this one, and I remain in sympathy with certain profound theologians and thinkers who remain still

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within a still forming Church. I have been addressing them, quite sure that I can learn from them and from the Christian tradition, but sure also that Christianity needs to understand more than it now does about world spiritual traditions, not to mention spiritual practice, e.g., *meditation*, which is not a practice for an elite, but appropriate and possible for most people. And that is another theme of this book, another range of possible readers. We westerners can hardly now do philosophy as though there were no Asian or East Asian traditions from which we can learn, especially given the early examples of Schopenhauer and Heidegger, though by that token, Asian thinkers may also be able to learn from the west, an ironic thought, because they have often been forced to, in a way in which we have never had to know about them, and that is an embarrassing imbalance which makes both for resentment and conceit. I have tried, I am bold to boast, to do philosophy of religion in a new way, a way that has moved on from a western preoccupation with the issues of natural theology, though those issues still have a place and cannot be ignored. There are philosophers I respect who are theists, 'Platonic theists'. Philosophy is a strange game, given to fashion, a most unphilosophical tendency, since philosophy must constantly look to its own assumptions, to what it had not noticed it had taken for granted, which is why it needs to start in silence. There are philosophers too clever and quick, too clear about what they think, too assured about their command of good sense, to give close attention to their own premises, and they are just the ones most likely to deride the theists . . . if they are not theists themselves, the comedy of opposite views and equal conviction. I hope I do not deride them myself. But I do disagree with them. Or rather, their arguments seem only to articulate what would be the case if they were right, they express their *belief*. But so do their opponents. So I disagree with both, theists and atheists alike, with a proper agnosticism. But disagreeing here gives one work to do, and what I have attempted is a description of a non-theistic spirituality. I have friends enough who have struggled with religion, who have struggled in particular with *belief*, seeing it as the gateway to religion. If only I could believe . . . is what they say. I have attempted a philosophy of religion into which I have sought to integrate both aesthetics and moral philosophy, to make them all one single, integrated thing. Though I also disclose the secret ambition of all aestheticians, to show that aesthetics is the *sine qua non* of philosophy. To be more specific, the concept of the 'aesthetic idea', and its connection with the free play of imagination and understanding, developed in Kant's third Critique, the

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Critique of Judgment, provides, I think, a wonderful description of one of the fruits of inwardness. It describes the conditions for a shift in sensibility, and has a more powerful role, since it illuminates the structure of sense. Kierkegaard tells us that subjective thinking requires ‘indirect communication’, which is essentially ‘artistic’. Such communication, I suggest, is a matter of introducing an *image*, the evocative image that constitutes Kant’s aesthetic idea: under the condition of receptivity that poetry or art can itself engender, conception occurs. There is a quickening around the image of its field of connections. To put it more Platonically, the image *begets its kind* in the mind of the other. It is a form of what Diotima is made to call ‘procreation in beauty’, one which produces the spiritual progeny of wisdom and virtue, perhaps. So the task of the philosopher is to capture the structured movements of mind and action, coiled up unseen in particular thoughts and particular actions, but unfolding and flickeringly displayed by the power of the imagination in aesthetic experience. Philosophy is also reflection on experience, then, but reflection on a particular *kind* of experience, that of the *sense* of mind and action: philosophy must wait upon art and beauty.

At the heart of my account is the idea of *Besinnung* and *Besonnenheit*, a certain quality of attention, and a self-possession that is an *outcome*, not a principle, the development of both of which is a condition of revelation . . . perhaps. But the most significant revelation that has come to me, and I owe it to Tanabe Hajime, the Japanese philosopher, and to Simon Tugwell, is that human imperfection, properly understood, is a main route to knowledge. Once we start to talk of human imperfection we have to get the tone right. I do not know whether I have. But there is anyway a stiff and mainly male resistance to tones of voice associated with the acknowledgment of human failure, one which has its own tone of voice, strangely, of moral reproof, the unconscious disguise of resentful embarrassment, and the issue is how we are to do philosophy at all. I have gone for explorations of human subjectivity and what it might reveal about the world that remains undisclosed to one who does not follow that path. But that doesn’t absolve me from objectivity about just those matters. It is all to do with what one thinks one should be objective *about*. My turning to Buddhism was a matter of my *imagination* being seized by the metaphors of awakening and the mental poisons and release. Unlike that of the existence of God we here have questions which seem in principle determinable, though I think theological language, in spiritual *situ*, may be a plumbline, into the depths, but V. S. Pritchett’s character in *Our Wife* might be right when she opines that it

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is only a theory that plumb-lines go down straight. I believe I have developed a plausible kind of ethical naturalism in which so-called ‘moral language’ is reinterpreted and grounded in a well or badly informed responsiveness to others, an *appreciation* of them that motivates action and restraint. The point about the Greek virtues that I have mentioned is that I try to show them to represent stages in the development of this responsiveness, in the development of a sensibility which may give rise to imperatives, but is not founded on any such, a sensibility which can be strengthened and widened in its scope, under the pressure of historically determined conditions. But this responsiveness to others still has to contend with issues about what constitutes well-being and harm. There is a temptation, not wholly to be resisted, which makes us rest in an ultimate pluralism about conceptions of well-being and human flourishing. However I have sought to temper the diversity of ultimate ends with the thought that human beings live either in the light of knowledge and understanding, or in the false light of delusion, or the darkness of ignorance.

I have learnt from many teachers and colleagues, some of whom will look askance at what I seem to have taken from our conversations. Ah, yes, conversations, with philosophers, and academic colleagues from other disciplines . . . and with students. I must not be nostalgic about those days before the cuts, before the new social controls depressed and undermined the university community, alienated its members from one another and from their students. Now it is a hurried word, a snatched, a compressed exchange, in for teaching, away again for ‘research’, to publish the demanded pound of under-considered flesh. I doubt whether I could have written what lies ahead if I were starting out now, in the present atmosphere of institutional neurosis, in which the ‘research assessment exercise’ penalises long-term projects, so that someone who has not published within the period is counted as ‘not research active’, and ‘pulls down’ their department. I was given space to develop as a philosopher in the time that it takes, never forced to seek to put into print what I was not ready to put my name to. So I remember with gratitude the serious philosophical culture sustained by the East Anglia philosophers, until they were forced to shake the dust from their heels. I owe much to Martin Scott-Taggart and the late Martin Hollis, to early conversations with David Corker. More recently I have been sustained by the friendly scepticism of my colleagues at Liverpool, and by the culture established there by Stephen Clark, in which I felt free to think as I needed to. Terry Diffey and Timothy Sprigge were

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enormously encouraging when I needed encouragement most, and I was glad of the shrewd comments by David Bastow on a pretty formless draft of this book. Over the years my greatest debt has been to Michael Weston, Anthony Gash, David Cockburn, Robert Morrison, Prabodh Parikh and Probal Dasgupta, for their friendship, conversation and conviviality, though I cannot say what would have become of me without the subtle *kalyanamitrata* of Sangharakshita or the generosity of members of the Order he founded.

CHAPTER ONE

A philosophy that is not a philosophy'

I

I had thought to say that philosophers need to remember that they are also human, but how does that make them different from anyone else? And yet, thinkers, philosophers, stand in a particular relation to their own humanity because they offer representations of our human relation to reality, and their vocation rides upon an interior acknowledgment of human *weakness*. If humankind cannot bear very much reality, then what philosophers cannot bear cannot be disclosed or represented by them either, our experience will be too narrow, our discernment too weak, and so our philosophy fail through the failure of our humanity. So we fail if we are too weak, but one of the conditions of success is a due recognition of weakness . . .

. . . It depends on our response to our limitations and the manner in which we discover them. But it has been an abiding fear of mine, that the state of my own humanity, the way I think and feel, the way I *act*, or fail to act (soured by my deeds) may also affect, adversely, my philosophy, my capacity to see, to see error, to see ordinary truths. (And is the nature of that fear that I shall be *found out*? There are surely other reasons, of a more pressing kind, to take care of the self – for the sake of others, for instance, who are harmed in proportion to our not taking that care.)

But one thing at a time. It is frightening, that the way I am, the way we are, may distort perception, perhaps deeply distort it, and we not know it, be quite blind. And there is nothing more chilling than to hear the deluded speak, with complete confidence in themselves. Maybe the distinction between appearance and reality, in its human applications, is grasped in an overcoming of delusion that depends upon interior conditions, upon upheaval and radical change . . .

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One problem is that philosophy is so *contested*. It is not that contest, or *agon*, is bad in itself, *au contraire*. But there are different conceptions of what it is to do philosophy at all, and there are these *guardians* of particular conceptions of philosophy, who are not prepared to recognise anything that falls outside the terms of the conception they guard, in a tense conceit of selfhood. Certainly there are many activities embraced within the field of philosophy, all of which have their place; the difficulty comes when people identify philosophy itself with one particular set of activities. For example, I can imagine a familiar kind of philosopher who would honestly not see what the fuss I am making about interior conditions and human frailty was all about. Surely, they would say, philosophical questioning is straightforward enough once you get the hang of it. There are questions about the nature of mind, about the logical relations between statements, the structure of our concepts, that can be dealt with quite ‘objectively’, without all this reference to the moral virtue of the philosopher. Well the claim was not so much about virtue as about its absence, but essentially they are *right* about what they specify. The mistake is to *reduce* philosophy to this particular set of activities, often premised upon assumptions about how the world really is that *may* after all derive from a too ‘narrow body of accepted consciousness’. In any event, maybe philosophy depends upon an *awakening*. I thus make a Buddhist connection, but also allude to Heidegger’s treatment of truth as *aleitheia* – the truth is something that had escaped one’s notice and is now apparent, something you awaken to, a sudden sense of the before unapprehended relations of things. You are not looking in philosophy for correct but unrevealing definitions, but for illuminations of the field of sense, increase in understanding, the sight of what was formerly concealed from view. The shape of an expression’s magnetic field shines for a few moments, then disappears again. The task of the philosopher is to trace the pattern that reveals itself only for moments and then slips from sight. This, I ought to say, brings Heidegger close to Wittgenstein’s notion of grammar and perspicuous representation, a connection caught, perhaps, by Gottfried Benn’s (1963, 99) ‘*Ein Wort, ein Satz: Aus Chiffren steigen / erkanntes Leben, jähher Sinn*’: ‘A word, a phrase – out of ciphers rises recognised life, sudden sense’. It also brings Heidegger and Wittgenstein very close to the Kantian concept of an aesthetic idea, but that is for later.

I am not opposed to conceptual analysis, to the analytic tradition, far from it, the world needs it. The mistake is to suppose that you can go on

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in headlong and start analysing concepts and their logical relations, *before* you realise the form of your own subjectivity. Something prior is required, an *ascesis*, that is not easy to describe, but its spirit can be evoked. An attitude of humility does not catch it, the term has been too much abused, it is a certain quality of receptive attention that needs to be cultivated first. Inwardness or interiority are the conditions upon which philosophy depends: analyse, if you like, what then swims into view, and certainly do not dissect your impressions until they have worked on your soul.

I am telling a very old story, to which it is so hard to *listen*, even though listening is the very theme. Matthew Arnold sees it clearly, this inwardness of spirit, which is in peril from our mechanical and material civilisation, and now from our electronic compulsions, but is the condition of the imagination, in free play, the condition of culture, an inward operation, from which we are ruthlessly distracted. Thus Arnold, but it is Kant he is following.

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The Japanese philosopher, Tanabe Hajime (1986), wrote a book first published in 1946, which he called *Philosophy as Metanoetics*.¹ It has a startling thesis, announced with humility in his moving Preface. Language is such a delicate instrument, is it not, and words can so easily be misunderstood, especially those which we know by rote and have no profound relation to. The startling thesis is that if you want to be a philosopher you need to confess your sins and repent.

This is profound as well as startling, since it more or less gives us everything. Why do we have to confess our sins and repent in order to do philosophy? Well, the claim is that it is already a part of philosophy. The condition of self is a crux. Repentance and transformation already invoke essential polarities, that there are states of the self in which it is submerged in ignorance and delusion and strikes out wildly, and a state of being awake, and the painful transition, from a scattering of distracted and dissipated energies to some kind of unity, from a state in which one is incapable of acting well to one in which one sometimes finds oneself doing what is needed without, it seems, any effort of one's own.