

EDITORIAL

It Begins with Desire: Questions of Philosophical Practice

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We will show below (Chapter V) how philosophy, a love of truth which is always to come, is justified in its broader signification of being the wisdom of love.

—Levinas 1981: 188 n. 5

We are completely puzzled, then, and you must clear up the question for us, what do you intend to signify when you use the word “real”. Obviously you must be quite familiar with what you mean, whereas we, who formerly imagined we knew, are now at a loss.

—Plato, *Sophist* 244a

This same perplexity has always lurked in the word “philosophy” for me, not much helped by a high school principal who once joked, “What is philosophy? Well, it’s what philosophers do when they philosophize.”

One could, I suppose, begin with those who are quite familiar with what they mean by “philosophy,” those for whom it assumes a certain terrain, tended by certain ways and means: the “professing,” type-A philosopher, academic, assertive—and also occasionally arrogant, alas. But here’s a story: once upon a time, in an undergraduate ethics class, just such an alpha professor served up the standard “brain-in-a-vat” thought experiment. “Imagine you and your world are not as you believe them to be. In fact, all you are is simply a brain floating in a vat of nutrients, hooked up to some machine that stimulates it so that all your perceptions of experience, all your beliefs and memories and feelings are exactly as you have them now. Are you still the same person?” What was supposed to follow was agreement and discussion of whether the good for that brain would be the same as what is good for you now.

Except that some of us, noticeably the few women in the class, said *no*. Said, *that brain-in-a-vat is not a human life*. We could not articulate why not,

but neither would we accept that it was. The following week, the stalemate was broken when the professor announced that he had gone to the pub with his grad students, and they had all agreed that we were wrong.

Endearing as I (retrospectively) find his research methodology, this is not the sort of philosophy that intrigues me or that presaged my guest editor stint in this special issue of *Janus Head* devoted to “contemporary philosophical practices.”

It seems to me that there is something else, something *new*, going on, that the terrain and expression of philosophy is not so certain; nor is it certain what it may be becoming, or where it may be leading. This is what interests me.

The “call for papers” for this issue was intentionally open-ended:

Philosophical practice could be any endeavor undertaken in a philosophical spirit. To philosophize suggests an engaged exploration and examination of self and world and all our relations.

It is to quest after truth or meaning, to “think deeply in order to act strongly” (Cabral), to “have the courage to leave no question hidden” (Schopenhauer).

Or, philosophical practice could be seen as the return of an age-old desire to offer some consolation and relief for human suffering (Boethius, Epicurus): it could be philosophy as an ethical practice, “the wisdom of love, in the service of love” (Levinas).

And look who has answered the call:

Margret Grebowicz, looking for ground to stand upon in a postmodern age, imagining “the conditions of the possibility of the kind of political subjectivity necessary for today’s particular politics of resistance,” calling on philosophy to return to its mission as “a thinking engagement with the world,” and taking up Lyotard’s challenge to perceive thought itself as something uncivil and strange;

Alphonso Lingis, writing about the words of honor that make us thoughtful, and the density of the word *I* at the core of oneself: not identity, but a fantasy space of excesses and commitments through which we may *contact* each other, and the respect that is due to ourselves and our visions and the stories we generate with and for each other;

Seth Huebner, also concerned with subjectivity and ethics, here using Virginia Woolf's writing to wonder about identity's relation to violence, scapegoating and war;

Bert Olivier, with another war story, a Lacan-flavored reading of the film *A Very Long Engagement*, where philosophy and narrative merge in a study of *desire* as the guiding force of ethical action and of a good life;

John M. Desmond, to urgently—and with dreadful timing—draw our attention to the destructive effects our ways of listening in the world have created in the Louisiana wetlands.

Next come two essays by colleagues of mine: philosophers engaged in the practice of philosophical counseling—

Robert Walsh, who speaks of philosophical counseling as “a living practice from within an originary ethical response-ability,” a way of life and a way of naturally-therapeutic relatedness; and

Peter Raabe, on philosophical counseling's alternative to psychotherapy's use and abuse of Freudian diagnostic markers;

Robert Scott Stewart, exploring the novels of Walker Percy, Jonathan Franzen and Richard Ford to argue against the tendencies of psychological reductionism. He presents instead, à la Aristotle or Macintyre, a virtue-based view of a well-lived life;

Jana Milloy, whose exquisite attentiveness to the movements of writing discloses a mingling of word and world and absence and self that is at once familiar and marvelous;

Tom Strong and *Andy Lock*, presenting a neat overview of the orientation and perspectives of postmodern “discursive” approaches to psychotherapy, such as the narrative, solution-focused, social and collaborative language systems therapies, where conversation is understood, “beyond any word, gesture or sentence,” to be taking place within local, inter-related “systems of meaningful practice that inform people's interactions”;

Louis N. Sandowsky, with a Janus-faced look at psychoanalytic theory—the backward-looking Freudian and the future-oriented existentialist—questioning how an existentialist phenomenology might differently accommodate the territory Freud mapped with his structures of the unconscious;

Stuart Grant, noting that phenomenology is more often discussed than done, reports on his ongoing investigation into the essential phenomenon of “being in an audience”;

Mike Kantey’s autobiographical fragment, demonstrating the call to philosophy both as a quest for *sophia*, *logos* and sacred wisdom, and also as resistance to mad and brutal circumstance;

Jonathan Diamond, writing of the difficulties of generations, where Wittgenstein and Janis Joplin conspire to host a father and son reunion;

And finally, an interview with filmmaker and psychomagician *Alejandro Jodorowsky* by *Ana E. Iribas* that delights me every time I read it. Where else should we end up but with a man who’s *done* with philosophizing, who is “finished with inner dialogue. As far as possible.” *Salute!*

All of these, each in its own way, and whatever else they do, present an idea of philosophical practice. Reading them, I could see philosophy as an orienteering or navigational practice, triangulating the concern of the writer with different cultural expressions. Or philosophy as a political practice and a practice of justice, which would expose and challenge abuses of power. Philosophy as a practice of awareness—paying attention to subjectivity and desire. Or philosophy as a pedagogic practice, as discourse and dialogue. As a therapeutic practice. As the practice of reason and the practice of ethics. And always, continuously, the thread through it all: philosophy as a relational practice, as being in relation.

The question about the question

But where does it come from? What is philosophy’s root? What calls for philosophy, or calls philosophy forth?

Philosophy begins with a vulnerability and a problem. It begins with an itch. It begins with doubt. It begins with longing, with a desire that can be neither denied nor satisfied. There is a restlessness. This state or condition or experience can be thought of as *having a question*.¹

And what sort of creatures are we to *have a question*? How is it that such a state can befall or be thrust upon us? We may talk about *having*, as if a question was in our possession, but it isn't. We are possessed by it. We have it only in the sense that it concerns us, perhaps suddenly more than anything else. We have it in the sense that we can't not care about it. And the way to care about it is to move into it, follow where it leads, discover the wisdom of it. The way of philosophical practice is to realize the quest of a question.

We philosophize to reconcile, to get something *right*, in accordance with the authority of the question, whether this be called truth or beauty or good; an accord confirmed by our felt sense of that authority, as knowing or recognition or conscience, or Wittgenstein's "complete clarity" in which problems simply disappear.²

To face a question requires courage, patience and sincerity. Other than the restless and itchy desire of the quote above, it can also be alarming, disorienting, alienating and painful. People who *have questions* might well appear—particularly to those who don't—as dangerous or mad. However, it is simply a mistake to reduce the condition of *having a question* to a psychological or biochemical one. People with psychiatric diagnoses may also have questions, in this sense, and be called to philosophize, but having a question is neither a disorder nor a disease. It's just human.

The first step is to find the right form of the question and what it presents, put it in terms we can understand, in order to work with it. Is it about self or the world or both? What's going on, and what is the meaning of this? What's what, and why? It may be that discovering the question brings clarity enough to get on with. If not, then one has to apply oneself further, to join in, wrestle, to bring all of one's resources to bear. It becomes necessary for us to take up that which has taken up us.

Because the philosophical question is a matter of wisdom rather than information, and because its particular resolution depends upon the immediate felt sense of the one who has it, each one must find their own way through. But, particularly in crises of faith or belief when it is *oneself* in question, one can hardly do it alone. There is a movement to dialogue, to books and to writing, to conversation—a yearning to consort and take refuge

with others.³ Emmanuel Levinas noticed this as well:

Yet the question about the question is more radical still. Why does research take form as a question? How is it that the “what?”, already steeped in being so as to open it up the more, becomes a demand and a prayer, a special language inserting into the “communication” of the given an appeal for help, for aid addressed to another? (Levinas 1981: 24)

When we *have a question* we begin to *ask* questions ourselves, in anticipation of being heard, of being understood and assisted by another. This is the basis of a Levinassian counseling practice. Those who *have a question* certainly have to come to their own clarity or realization or settlement, but they need not—cannot—be left to do it alone. Some form of dialogue is necessary. Another can offer skilful support and encouragement, provide alternate perspectives, tell other stories.

The question between us

Now I can tell my old high school principal that *philosophy*, what I do when I philosophize, is the work that emerges in and from the ten thousand conditions of *having a question*. It’s what I’m doing now, here, with the question of the meaning of philosophical practice. Through the months of preparing this issue of *Janus Head*, I have read, written and thought through this question, trying to find the right bit of it for this essay, finally settling on the origin of philosophical practice as a response to a question that has somehow captured us...

From what perspective does one think about questions? Who is engaged here? As for me (and as for Derrida (1980), whose words these are) —“*En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici.*” In this very moment, in this work, here I am. Yes.

And who do I have the honor of addressing? Every word here anticipates *you*, you who might recognize what I am describing, you who might see the same thing. I try to present my thought in a manner that will live for you, move you, be of use to you. I await you. Since speech is only accomplished in the hearing of it, my speaking requires a *you* who hears. Philosophical clarity thus also must be the clarity to meet another in our work, a meeting in which the work might be accomplished, in which the distance between

us might *completely disappear*.

You'll forgive me for mentioning this unexpected intimacy we share here. Ordinarily, I know we should be more polite or reserved, should affect not to think about me actually here and you actually there or about me thinking about you. We should lift our eyes from such abrupt contact, as we might from any unsolicited glimpse of another's *vulnerability, restlessness, desire*. But really, there you are; here I am.

Does it matter what I look like or how I am writing this? Or if you're reading it in a restaurant, at your desk, or lying on the couch in a tatty bathrobe? We don't care. What matters is: do these words reach you? Do you find yourself opening to them? Am I alone in this? It's peculiar, ridiculous—as if everything could depend on such mere happenstance as *you* and *I* coming together like this. Nevertheless, there you are. And here am I.

With this painstaking urgency to speak clearly with you, I try to express my experience and understanding into this you-and-I-shaped space between us, to delineate a form we might share and know that we share. There is me here, with something to get across to you. And you there, providing a limit or a terminus that makes my expression possible, that makes meaning possible, that makes it possible for meaning to arise between us. And the space between us, which joins and separates us, in this case takes the form of a question mark. As if, in some arcane flight of fancy, one could diagram it like this: **I?YOU**.

Can you see it? Reading from the top down, the question moves from me towards you and bends back and down again, finally finding the ground between us. Or, from the ground up, it comes to me from you, binds me to you and to the source. But what about the gap between the hook and the dot? A leap of faith? A trace of transcendence?

I speak of "between us" in order to bring to mind Levinas's *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (1998). This notion of philosophy beginning from an experience of vulnerability, desire and restlessness is, I believe, well in accord with his thinking. For Levinas, "between us" is the originary site of the subject—a subject which is at once a being amongst beings and a unique relationship with *alterity*, with an otherness "otherwise" than ontological difference, a relationship that takes place as being-for-the-other, or responsibility.

There is something uncanny in the way that *having a question* exceeds and undermines our will and our freedom. There is something uncanny in the way that dialogue with *an other*—a stranger or a neighbor—restores them to

us and then allows us to return to our question, to bring it to some fruition through whatever techniques and resources are at hand. In both cases, the uncanniness has to do with the radical alterity Levinas speaks of. In both cases, I am in contact with “*something*” I can never contain or encompass or project, which is beyond me or comes to me from beyond any horizon—but which is still essential to who and how I become *I*. As I am compelled to you, as I am interrogated by a question, so I am.

It is this subjectivity that can find itself both in question and in dialogue, this subject who is called to philosophize. It isn’t a matter of “I question, therefore I am”: philosophy isn’t simply—or from the first—a “thinking agent” approaching and exposing some thing, bringing light into a darkness. Rather, it is as if one were questioned into being: *I, response*. And my philosophical practice, before anything I say, is already an expression of response, for the Other.

This is a strange thing. Nevertheless, I think it may be so. And I think it returns the practice of philosophy to its rightful place as the mother of all the arts and technologies of human culture. If “to philosophize suggests an engaged exploration and examination of self and world and all our relations,” it is because we are first of all caught up in an earlier engagement with alterity that comes to mind in the form of a question.

The essentially enigmatic force of questions is readily seen: in our sensitivity to who may ask questions, of whom, in what situation, and who can refuse to answer; or when we recognize that someone who has a question is both vulnerable and difficult to deny; or how the one who is questioned is both appealed to as a “master” and put into service. And we know that asking questions can also—precisely because of the way it carries an authority which binds the one questioned—be appropriated or take place as an act of power. Being questioned, whether by a teacher or a panhandler, a pollster or a lover, always threatens our privacy, our inner space. We know that interrogation can be used to intimidate, to harass or—in its third degree—to punish and torture.

And yet. There is still the unremarkably simple and graceful everyday experience where people meet one another with care and not violence; where a *sincere question* elicits an *honorable response*. Even in this moment, in this work, I found myself in the company of all the other writers here, their insights and observations echoed here, challenging and encouraging my own. Inadvertently and generously—such splendid abundance!—they have come to my aid, were already here for me, before me. How extraordinary,

really, to catch sight of this.

This way that an appeal or demand from others can get under our skin, completely without our invitation or co-operation, and the way that their responsiveness can find us *right where we are*, would seem to support Levinas's description of a subject that is always already intimately associated with the Other, subjected to the Other, rather than being merely stuck with and within its self—or in a vat—concerned with a good that is for itself alone. This Levinassian *I*, responsive and responsible to and before *you*, and to and before the question that seizes me, yields another understanding of philosophy's origin which, particularly, can conceive of philosophical counseling as, from the first, a practice of ethics and the wisdom of love.

A question of philosophical counseling

As a counselor and philosopher, my conceptual foundation—which includes the recognition of relational subjectivity and philosophy's origin as sketched out above—is captured in another of Levinas's titles: "Ethics as first philosophy." While *first philosophy* refers in the usual manner to "the causes and first principles of being," here *ethics* is not a doctrine of principles and norms, but rather a bearing: "a comportment in which the other, who is strange and indifferent to you, who belongs neither to the order of your interest nor to your affections, at the same time matters to you. His alterity concerns you" (Levinas, in Robbins, 2001).

The root foundation of a Levinas-inspired philosophical counseling practice is the alterity of the other, the immediate unique fact of our relatedness and the situation in which we find ourselves together. *Il me regarde*: he looks at me/he concerns me. The therapeutic relationship is not, at heart, an encounter between "role-players": a philosophical counselor and her guest. At heart, it is always *I* and *You*, face to face, each of us singular and irreplaceable.

Philosophical counseling as a philosophical practice doesn't begin with knowledge and applications, but with a *state or condition or experience* that can be thought of—if you will—as *having a guest*.

Philosophical practice begins with a vulnerability...

I sense the other's—*your*—vulnerability as you show up with your confusion and your trouble, in the sincerity and depth of your question, in the risk

you are running by revealing yourself to me. And my own vulnerability in receiving you: the imperative that I conduct myself with honor and welcome you, even though I can't know you and what you bring, or what you need from me, what I have to give you; expecting only that I will be changed by our encounter. (*Philosophical practice begins with doubt.*)

... and a problem.

My responsibility to and for you is my problem. And your problem, your *question*, is here with us as well. Through my responsibility, your question becomes my problem, too, although the "diagram" for me is now shaped like this: **YOU?I**. This is what we work with, you and I. It is always unique, singular and new. You'll need to find your own way, but every resource of mine can be called upon to augment your own.

First of all, there is simply my presence for you. I am for you another to navigate by or to be the terminus of your expression; to open and hold, from moment to moment, the connectedness "between us" in which meaning can unfold or truth come to light. Then, the dialogic resources of an interlocutor: listening, questioning, encouraging, in order to deepen and broaden your (our) expression, shaping it as needed in accordance with experience and reason. Also, the "academic" resources of information, perspectives from other thinkers, other traditions and stories, developing skills of awareness and interpretation. And certainly, the good that comes with a simple companionship that is patient and non-coercive, without ambition or programmed goals.

All of this is not under my command, as if gestures of my goodness or generosity: it is demanded of me in the presence of a guest, in the appeal from this other who is troubled and burdened. With such a boundless responsibility, it is impossible to say one has done enough, given all one could. That's my problem, too.

Philosophical practice begins with longing, with a desire that can neither be denied nor satisfied.

Where is my desire here, that singular Desire which is the "prerequisite for truly ethical action" (cf. Olivier, in this volume)? "Let us again note the difference between need and Desire: in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one's teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me" (Levinas 1969:117).

It is only my contact with you that grants me an “uncharted future,” only that relationship which guarantees and justifies my presence, which singles me out, distinguishes me amongst all the things of the world. This situation, laughable and preposterous, evokes in me humility, tenderness, gratitude and Desire. It produces my dignity: if there is more to me than a clod of flesh and need, if there is anything sacred in my living, it may well come to me as a burden and a gift, as desire, as precisely this responsibility. A philosophical practice is an opportunity to honor relatedness and interdependence, to be with another and let the other be.

There is a restlessness and an itch.

Yes. So get up. Scratch it.

Why? Because digging down is what we do (especially when anything else is impossible). Because we love truth and aspire to the beautiful. For moments of insight, understanding and clarity, and the confidence (however transitory) these lend to our actions. Because it brings out the best in us, because there is some *excellence* to it. Because it's righteous. Because we are called to. Because we have a mind to. Because our hearts are set on it.

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Notes

¹ I copied this quotation into a notebook a couple of years ago. Now I discover I didn't get the correct bibliographic details. My embarrassed apologies, and, if any reader recognizes it, please contact this journal or me.

²“For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means

that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. — The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* into question” (Wittgenstein 1953: §133.).

³ It may only be an internal dialogue, but even so, one directs words towards oneself as to another.