

Soul Sickness and Salvation

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As I enter the next second of my life, while writing these lines, I am aware that to be swept by the enigma and to pause — rather than to flee and forget — is to live within the core.¹

That we live in an era of fragile and shifting identity is beyond dispute. Modernity, it seems, provides contexts and conditions for Socratic self-questioning that go well beyond anything that the Greeks might have understood. Perhaps the worst form of this identity crisis is that of the self, “lost in the cosmos,” a crisis parodied in the novels of Walker Percy as consisting of random fugue states, off and on amnesia and overarching despair brought on by way of such devices as old movies, poker games and (last but not least) those old “ravaging particles.” In his Kierkegaardian parody, *The Last Self-Help Book*, Percy takes on this condition in an interesting way.² For example, in Question 7 of the book’s so called “self-help quiz” he asks: “What does the salesperson mean when she fits a customer with an article of clothing and says, “It’s You””? It accentuates your best features? Everyone is wearing it? It will please your lover? Sadly, all too often what she ought to mean is this: ‘You really are nothing without it, a metaphysical nought.’”

There are those who continue to insist that our age is, as the poet Auden once put it, the age of anxiety. Upsurges in maladies such as chronic obesity, eating disorders, substance abuse, clinical depression, and a dramatic rise in attempts at suicide (the latter especially a problem on college campuses), as well as the proliferation and success of junk spirituality such as “Chicken Soup for the Soul,” make me think that Percy was onto something. Freud himself saw that with civilization had come a kind of unhappiness unlike any ever known before, an unhappiness which, coupled with the ever new fruits of scientific technology, breeds a kind of violence never before seen on the face of the earth. Who can really sit with the kind of knowledge one finds upon reading, say, *The New York Times*, with its tales of atrocity, genocide, and geo-catastrophe and stay sane?

When I read novelists like Percy I think of others who have signaled what they take to be the spiritual pathos of our time. I think, for example, of Martin Heidegger’s adaptation of Kierkegaardian despair: Human beings, in this modern age, living in the forgetfulness of being, are unable to forget and afraid to remember one rudimentary fact, the fact of being. What, then, does it mean not only to exist, but to take one’s existence into account? For a writer such as Paul Tillich, it means to live in an overpowering awareness of one’s contingency, of the fragility of meaning, and still find “the courage to be.” It means to do whatever is necessary to avoid what Heidegger has referred to as “the forgetfulness of being,” even if that means dying in order to be reborn.

Elsewhere I have been tempted to name this overall condition a main concern of philosophy. I have been tempted to argue, first of all, that only a spiritual remedy will get at what ails us, at least those of us who, following William James, might be

labeled sick souls, souls in need of a second birth. Secondly, I have suggested that such a remedy can be found in philosophy understood as an educational practice of living. If I have been at all right about this, then it is legitimate to inquire more carefully as to the nature of what this philosophical practice might amount to.

Mackler takes up this task of inquiry in a refreshing and edifying manner. I am especially grateful for her paper, for in it she speaks for those of us who see the fate of the philosophy of education as a matter of life and death, those of us for whom the end of philosophical education would mark not merely the loss of livelihood but also the loss of being. Keeping her distance from all forms of sophistry as well as all merely professional, academic concern, she begins her remarks with a search for a most lofty, most decidedly non-instrumental, understanding of the philosophical vocation. This understanding she finds through an analysis of what she, following writers such as Hadot, Nehemas, and Schusterman, calls “philosophy as a way of life” (hereafter referred to as PWL). On the basis of this understanding, Mackler intimates the existence of another set of “primordial conventions” between philosophy and education beyond those set out by Dewey, conventions that might solidify a marriage of these two disciplines whose recollection might once again invigorate our souls. What she intimates is a philosophical and human vocation that involves the therapeutic care of those who lie wounded, spiritually or otherwise, all around us. The question she raises is, to my mind, central: might not philosophers of education become medics on the psychological battlefields of our anxious age?

PWL, as Mackler describes it, is a particular way of learning to live. Learning to live, she says, involves most primarily the fashioning of one’s life. On this view it is as if everyone who lives any kind of life assumes and enacts answers to philosophical questions concerning the good life and the nature of the self and its world. Thus, for Plato, those who are philosophically illiterate understand the good life to consist of fame, riches, and the satisfaction of the crudest needs and appetites. In pursuit of such a life the Mob seeks out the Greek equivalent of our religious quacks, motivational speakers, and the quasi-pornographic entertainment industry’s ever new forms of distraction. According to the Platonic diagnosis, the lives of such persons are ultimately based on a wrong answer to the most central metaphysical question of all, the question of the ultimate nature and destiny of the self. PWL, for Plato, involves coming to a refined and conclusive metaphysical solution to this question, and practicing a life in accordance with the dictates of that metaphysics. Yet for Socrates, unlike Plato, such a life consists, it seems, simply in the sustained deliberation over various solutions to metaphysical quandaries, quandaries that are seemingly too difficult to ever be solved.

As a proponent of philosophical education and practice I am pleased by Mackler’s beginning. Moreover, I very much hope that other young and gifted philosophers will help construct a philosophy for healing the world.³ Beyond this praise, however, I am afraid that I have only several quibbles to offer. First of all, although I would not fault her for her criticism of the work of professional philosophy as a closed domain, I am worried about Mackler’s optimism concerning its integration into PWL. For example, she suggests that one of the tasks of the

proponents of PWL is to test philosophical theories through living or embodying them. This sounds suspicious to me. How would I test to find out what metaphysical theory (such as realism or anti-realism) was true? Whether a deontological or consequentialist theory of ethics is better fitted to the facts? First of all, one might complain that ordinary life is vastly underdetermined by ontology. (Berkeley can explain my certainty that the hotel I am reading this in is in Toronto as well as Locke or Descartes.) But my point is a more stringent one. I am not at all convinced that philosophical claims are not vacuous. If, as Wittgenstein claimed, they are merely disguised non-sense, examples of language going on a holiday, what exactly is there for PWL to test?⁴

A second question for Mackler has to do with the following issue: What can the philosophical search for the good life amount to after we dispense with metaphysics? Nehemas himself speaks of such a life as one of “flourishing” and delineates what this means in terms of a rather aesthetic consistency. Similarly, Richard Rorty, at times, has described this search as aimed at overcoming “the anxiety of influence” by becoming a completely new self-creation.⁵ My own sense is that the idea of self-creation is as overwrought as its philosophical partner, self-discovery. If “self-creation” talk, as opposed to talk of “self-discovery” is meant to save us from metaphysical realism, does it not simply replace realism with an equally pernicious (and equally non-sensical) metaphysic of its own (idealism)? In light of this one might resort, as Rorty sometimes does, to a metaphor taken from Darwin. In this context, the success of Nehemas’s heroes, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault, can be understood not merely as the production of lives as works of art but as newly proposed adaptations to new and evolving problematics. Yet, contrary to Rorty, culture is not like a coral reef, and individual lives are very different from Darwinian species.⁶

I want again to insist that these criticisms are nothing more than quibbles, products of a professional education in puzzle solving, entertainment for those who expect this sort of thing at a meeting like this. (I’m sure that Mackler, as good a puzzle solver as anyone, can deal with them.) My major concern is a rather more personal one than such work allows, a problem for me as an existing individual rather than a professional philosopher. In this vein, it is not the content of Mackler’s version of PWL but, rather, its range that troubles me. Neither she nor Arcilla, in their considerations of the marriage of philosophy and education have kept me, and those like me, in mind.

For many people, those who James refers to as “healthy-minded,” the search for the good life is enough. But then there are the others, figures such as Augustine and Al-Hallaj, Ety Hillesum and Rabbi Mendl of Kotz, Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, and James himself, whose restless hearts could never be satisfied on the level of goodness alone. (For contemporary practitioners of this philosophy I would concentrate on persons such as Gandhi, Heschel, and Martin Luther King, rather than those highlighted by Nehemas and company.) For such figures, philosophy, as I understand it, was a practice of dying in which the key is as much humility as logic, as much radical amazement as doubt. It is a practice in which the love of wisdom is

never confused with the love of argument. For these sick-souled philosophers the end of the quest cannot simply be the moral life but, rather, saintliness. And what, for these figures is saintliness? (I do not think I can get the kind of saintliness I need from Nietzsche or Foucault, or similar heroes such as Emerson, Montaigne, and Epictetus.) I would have to admit, even to this audience, that at the very least it involves a kind of salvation found in reliance on a power (not a theoretical entity, but a person) greater than ourselves who might restore the sick soul to sanity, not through the satisfaction of infantile needs, but, rather, through service to His Will.⁷

It seems that not everyone needs such a power. Not everyone is a sick soul, lost in the cosmos. But if you think you might be, consider this. Put aside the expedient, the ever-rampant demands of the lost, contemporary self, or at least seek the grace to do so. Take the time to seek out the sublime, the miracle and mystery of existence, whether it be awe-inspiring in its beauty or terrifying in its power, in the everyday, in that which is. Perhaps the sacred mountain, the center of the universe, exists on Mount Sinai or Harney Peak or on some continent barely remembered. But remember that this mountain also resides right where you are sitting now.⁸

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: FGS Publishers, 1995), 16.

2. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Noonday Press, 1983).

3. This need becomes all the more apparent when one examines the travesties being committed in the name of practical, therapeutic philosophy. For example, for the sad story of Lou Marinoff and philosophical counseling at CCNY, see Daniel Duane, "The Socratic Shrink," *The New York Times Magazine*, 21 March 2004, 344ff.

4. This is, however, not to deny that something (but not philosophical theories) is being tested in the practice of philosophical living. For a sense of what this testing might amount to, see M. Gandhi, *The Story of my Experiments with Truth: An Autobiography* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 2.

6. *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

7. Consider these remarks of King's, from a speech delivered in Memphis the night before his assassination: "Well I don't know what will happen to me now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will." Reprinted in Martin Luther King, *I Have a Dream* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 203.

8. See Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 110-12.