25. A Certain Amount of Clarity

No more than one can read all things would it do for me to drag into this account everything I have read. Even all I have thought and written over many years has a limited application to this always tentative advancement of my admittedly heterogeneous subject. By the same token, repetition is necessary but not to the point that it is less a constant reminder of key elements than a sort of puffery or pride that, giving up the ship, lets the egoism that drives this ship drop off the radar screen of this very same ship that . . .

– I'm drinking, Andrew. Did you notice?

. . . that, as the ship of truthtelling, has the impossible but perhaps becoming more possible than ever before task of tracking it.

– I'm feeling the effects. I would almost say I'm feeling no pain.

This over-extended and barely tolerable metaphor . . .

– Fine weather we're having.

. . . has the advantage of being itself an illustration of the egoism that is both being tracked and slipping out of sight.

– I hope it holds up till next week.

And yet if it weren't for this last remark . . .

– Then we'll have on this campus one of the greatest philosophers of our time.

. . . it would be, despite its pretensions, letting this egoism slip too easily out of sight.

– A man who's published twenty-five books, written countless articles, and has finally deigned, after much pleading and fund-raising, to honour us with his presence.

For although it may be construed as a mere preciosity, it prevents my claim – or really what is more a wish than a claim – from perverting itself.

– You've written a few stinging articles on him, Andrew. Damned if I didn't think — but the point is he's coming and it's up to all of us, critics as much

as admirers, to give him the royal treatment.

It is an egoism that has managed to distinguish itself from countless others by hitting the ovum of a new conception. Therefore luck, luck, luck but also pain, pain, pain. And, oh, the pain is enough to make one forget the luck or else view it as being less the nourishing and sustaining soil of innumerable factors than a large number of years of stubbornly stumbling along.

– Anyway, getting back to Shakespeare, he had a heart as big as all outdoors. And a way of peering — Andrew, I don't go into this sort of thing much but it was uncanny!

From Professor Ridd's *Religious Quest in the Modern Age* to Professor Burns' *Philosophy of Mind* and *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. A noteworthy change in that it was like going from a cornucopia-cum-crowded nest to a modest workshop-cum-war room. Unquestionably clarity and order, epitomized by rigorous arguments setting out to disqualify all contradiction and inaccuracy, held sway in the second more than in the first and, as the combination of philosophical thought and scholarly work and as, moreover, what set itself up in my mind as the playing field of the top players in the game, implied a challenge of some kind or other. To think of a whole community of recognized and renowned experts missing the boat precisely for the reason that the winning and, if I daresay so, the warring element figured so prominently in their bid for the truth was to imagine that the artist had already won the game. That is, by having the advantage, the sublime and most trustworthy advantage, of admitting defeat. Safeguarding the mystery even while elaborating all and everything about it was something I believed in as much as I suffered from having so much paltry and piecemeal knowledge. Stricken then as I am now and forever will be by this shortage or shortcoming or short-sightedness, I felt the need to take advantage of whatever opportunity arose to corner and spy out the myriad-mindedness of man in his pursuit of some lasting and unchallengeable position.

– Did you ever hear that Shakespeare was gay, Theo?

– Let's change the subject.

Due to factors that go beyond my simply having been a relative newcomer to philosophy (and particularly to that part of it called ordinary language philosophy), I wrote some unexceptional essays that don't interest me much now apart from the opportunity they provide to enrich this one. If, first of all, these essays are rather flat and uninspired and if, secondly, they do a rather

good job of reporting the arguments of philosophers but argue against them in a holus-bolus, sketchy, and appendage-like way (this weakness is not so uncommon in undergraduate papers and particularly those written for a philosophy course that, while laying stress on rigorous argument, may nonetheless provoke a both personal and wide-ranging response), then the matter seems to shape itself along the following lines. That a general competence in arguing to which I feel I can lay claim was outmatched by a greater one that may be called linguistic philosophy's. Furthermore, that mine overshot itself by trying to overshoot the second and that this overshooting or overreaching was the result of my resisting any temptation or pressure or even appeals of a goodly, positive, or practical nature to submit to it. In short, I did little more than trace it out as best I could and then, as a sort of conclusion, make a few statements, rather traditional and conservative ones, about what I believed philosophy is or should be. Viewed from the angle of, first, always having esteemed literature over philosophy and, secondly, encountering in the ordinary language school a renegade movement (Gilbert Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind*, calls Cartesian dualism the *official* doctrine and holds it to be radically mistaken), there was an anomaly in my reaction to it based on some conceptual confusion not with respect to what this school was targeting and professed to be able to get rid of, but with respect to my inability to deal with this claim and everything implied by it. Insofar as I didn't know how to clear up my confusion or insofar as I didn't know how much conception is *already* confusion and, furthermore, insofar as I was on the philosophical chessboard and made a maladroit move to get out of check, I ended up, and without much reason for self-congratulation, on the square that more or less represents the position of the majority.

"**The Will in Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*" (with a Short, Personal Appraisal*)***

"In dealing with the concept of volition, Gilbert Ryle purposely sets out to demonstrate its lack of coherence and that its existence is owed entirely to 'the myth of Cartesian dualism.' He states in the Foreword of his third chapter (i.e., 'The Will') that, unlike such concepts as thought, memory, and imagination, volition has no use in layman's language. People do not ordinarily refer to it or think of it as a distinct state of consciousness. Finding it then to be solely a technical or artificial concept arising out of a theory grounded in the aforesaid dualism, he believes that its ongoing use is unnecessary. Although he admits that the use of this concept is comprehensible as a reaction to the success of the natural sciences or, more properly, to what is perceived by many to be the threat of a thoroughly

deterministic or mechanical view of human nature, he argues that this *too* is a mistake.

"Before citing his objections to the concept of volition, Ryle describes it as part of 'the language of the para-mechanical theory of the mind.' According to this theory, there are mental processes or 'volitions' which cause all acts of the human body in the physical world. So it is that, when a man intentionally pulls the trigger of a gun (Ryle's example), what is presumed to be a correct explanation requires taking into consideration two levels of operation: the physical one of pulling the trigger and the mental one of *willing* to pull it.

"Ryle's first objection is relatively simple. He denies that there is any experience, be it of the empirical or introspective sort, to warrant the idea that voluntary actions are preceded and caused by mental operations. Despite what theorists have to say about it, no one goes about their daily tasks taking account of such operations or relying upon them in order to have these tasks successfully completed.

"For his second objection, Ryle argues that, if it were the case that a person's acts of volition were purely mental and therefore could never be witnessed by another person, it would be impossible for anyone to ascertain whether anyone else's actions were truly voluntary. He further argues that, with respect to the individual himself, it would be impossible for him to be certain that such and such a volition caused such and such an action because, as the theory allows (and perhaps even safeguards), the link between them remains mysterious.

"Ryle's third objection is the claim that the dualistic theory is paradoxical. According to him, this theory holds that there is a causal relationship between mind and body while also holding that the mind is 'outside the causal system to which bodies belong.'

"With his fourth objection, he argues that volition as a mental operation that causes both physical *and* mental acts runs into difficulty when moral significance is ascribed to it. The problem is that, if an action is to be voluntary, the volition which corresponds to it must itself be voluntary which in turn entails that it results from an earlier volition which in turn must be the result of an earlier one *ad infinitum*. As Ryle points out, if it is objected that volition cannot be described by using the predicates 'voluntary' and 'involuntary,' then the question immediately arises as to why *moral* predicates should be assigned to it.

"Ryle states that such mental processes as selection and resolution are authentic ones inappropriately identified with volition. In other words, both are members of the class of what dualists call inner operations of will and yet, as Ryle points out, either one of these processes or both together (i.e., selection and resolution) fall short of offering a full characterization of voluntary acts. This is as much as to say that these processes do not necessarily result in successfully completed actions. They may in fact be ascribed to tasks that for, one reason or other, fail or are abandoned. Yet the definition of volition is, according to the theory, a mental act which causes a physical performance or event. As Ryle points out, 'the dualistic theory could not allow that volitions ever fail to result in action, else further executive operations would have to be postulated to account for the fact that sometimes voluntary actions are performed.'

"Ryle claims that philosophers use the words 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' in a different sense than do people in everyday life. The latter apply these adjectives to 'actions which ought not to be done' whereas philosophers apply them to meritorious or fortuitous actions as well as reprehensible or unwelcome ones. Ryle shows that, if one were to extend the philosophical use into ordinary language, then the matter of getting a thing right would not be a question of competence or capability, but a question of *willing* to get it right. But if this willing as mental operation were taken to explain the meritorious or fortuitous action, then it would be, given the already adequate ways of explaining it, at best redundant and at worst nonsensical.

"Ryle states that, just as such terms as voluntary and involuntary are meaningful in light of questions that arise with respect to someone's competence or capability, so such expressions as 'strength of will,' 'effort of will,' and 'irresolute' can be defined in terms of a propensity or character trait. An adequate explanation of these matters then does not require the hypothesis of occult activities preceding and bringing about a person's actions.

"The reason philosophers accepted so readily the mind as a realm of causation is that, as Ryle contends, they felt that, with the success of the natural sciences, there was a threat that mechanical causation (as opposed to causation of a more mysterious sort) would undo the much cherished notion of free will. Much of the impetus for this rearguard action comes from the fact that any new scientific breakthrough tends to engender a cosmogony seeking to embrace everything in its conceptual grasp. Ryle argues that, although mechanical laws explain physical events which unquestionably include human affairs and actions, this does not rule out or

replace explanations of a decidedly different sort. In other words, there are other criteria by which to assess these affairs and actions and, although partially coincident with and obedient to mechanical laws, they are not reducible to them. Ryle likens the situation to a chess game where one is free to make all sorts of tactical or strategic moves even while these moves must conform to the rules of the game.

"Having now completed my summary of Ryle's chapter on the Will . . ."

– Oh devil, I can't just keep sitting here and listening to this!

". . . I would like to supplement it with a sort of personal commentary."

– We have no choice but to sit here and listen to it.

– I'll throw myself out the window first.

– You mean break the window and jump out?

– Why not? Gilles Deleuze did it.

– But he wanted to commit suicide.

– Isn't that preferable to staying here?

– It's not really so bad, Theo.

– Oh, not so bad, is it?

– The subject matter isn't so bad.

– It's not so bad if it comes from a scholar. Dammit, I get enough of this from my own students!

"To begin with, I cannot fault his arguments given that the epistemological difficulties which he scrutinizes are, to my mind, all too evident. I do find them to be, however, rather repetitious and wearisome. He makes a great deal of hay out of what all distinguished upholders of dualism must surely recognize as essential problems. I say 'essential' because, if they were only pseudo-problems that should disappear from the intellectual scene, as Ryle claims, philosophy would have little to occupy itself."

– To reduce the mind-body problem to a misuse of words would simply be an excuse for not doing anything.

"I'm reminded of the old saw about its being easier to destroy than to create. Surely it could never be more applicable than when it comes to a wholesale dismissal of mind-body dualism. Philosophy, to my way of thinking, is the attempt to determine rationally what religion merely asserts, namely, primary causes. As a corollary to this, it desires to show us a way of viewing reality apart from the normal and everyday."

– We don't need primary causes as explanation but only a notion of causality as the best and most adequate explanation.

"Thus I do not agree with Ryle when he says that certain questions which each age asks anew are simply the wrong questions and so should be discarded. He might just as well say let us dispense with philosophy. When he puts forth the idea that the mind is nothing more than logical behaviour, he is really saying we should not look for transcendent factors in either man or nature."

– First, let's not assume Ryle is a logical behaviourist. Second, the notion of transcendence offers nothing but an excuse for throwing up all sorts of occult faculties and entities. Finally, hypotheses as explanatory principles do away with the age-old practise of trying to assert absolute and incontestable ones.

"He seems to be saying that we should just get about the business of living from day-to-day. However, one thing that cannot be dismissed so easily is that man has looked upon the world with the feeling that, as well as being part of it, he is also estranged from it. As long as this feeling endures, logical solutions such as Ryle's will never be the final word."

– When it comes to treating the mind as a field of investigation, we don't need theories to be compatible with ordinary language any more than talk about subatomic particles has to be with talk about tables, desks, and chairs.

To confine truth and knowledge to an austere framework of logic and ordinary language. Is this not to use philosophy as a kind of shredding machine into which it itself is fed until there is nothing left but the shredder? If so, such high-minded destructiveness must be one with the drive for a discourse so pure and sure of itself that it will gladly be the most minimal

and modest and reckon silence preferable to the ordinary talk of philosophy. At least this is what the ordinary language philosophy inspired by Wittgenstein impressed me as: a radical reduction of truthtelling to the point where no lie or fiction is supposed to gain entrance.

– I'd say this about the great man: he put the kibosh on all those big-sounding words that philosophers have traditionally used with a good conscience from time immemorial. He was a pioneer and a pathbreaker. The forerunner of Quine who himself brought a new work ethic into philosophy more modest and diligent than ever before while at the same time giving to human inquiry – and this is the chief difference between them – a wide range of tasks, responsibilities, and areas of investigation. The field was left entirely open for responsible work, knowledge gathering, and exchanges of ideas that advance the theoretical and practical as a vast, interdependent, and ongoing project.

I feel a compulsion now to take up a later study of Wittgenstein that, as I know, is a plant with its own roots. To some extent I have already done this and outlined with more present than past understanding my reaction to the Wittgensteinian-inspired courses I took with Professor Burns. At the most basic level, what I was doing then was fighting for an interiority that, as it seemed to me, every thought and every work of literature testified to and that I didn't think should be dismissed simply because it defied logic. The difference between then and now was that then I was more inclined to take thought to be wholly separate and distinct from everything else. The constitution of thought or mind as a taking in of the world as much as a creating of one, as an operation so deep in history and prehistory that it takes all considerations to the vanishing point, didn't come to me itself as a thought until many years later.

– He's hitting on Heidegger now.

– He's all over. Let's discuss something else.

– What?

– Professor Watt! What do you think of that young man? Isn't he a crackerjack?

– Well, he's certainly efficient and, from everything I've heard, a very ambitious young man.

– Damn right. He won't let any flies settle on him. Oh, by the way, Andrew, that reminds me. Two students were in my office the other day. They were complaining about — I'm sorry to say this, old man. It appears you tell too many anecdotes in class.

Let me have this thought now for it seems to be timely. True I jumped about in my university studies. True I wasn't bothered by it because I took it to be in the spirit of a liberal arts education. And also true that I did the rather rare thing of transforming this jumping about into a series of dives that, as far as I could manage it, were deep. Hitting bottom without staying down very long was most often the way. But when I took yet another philosophy course and, in conjunction with it, began to read the works of Paul Tillich, an exception arose in that I adopted a more systematic approach. Perhaps it sprang out of my wanting to know as much about theism and Christianity as I could in an economic way. And so, finding Tillich to be an excellent teacher with his Heidegger-inspired theology, I spent quite some time with him. His statement that the philosophical question must always remain a question and that theology and religion invariably form an answer to it rang true to me. I suppose that the emotional and imaginative side of this question, written off by analytic philosophers who only see a mistake in the very posing of it, who only see a conceptual confusion that should be cleared up, was something I took seriously and wanted to explore from different angles.

– I can see they're not happy in my course but the fact is they're very rude and insolent.

In thinking about my study of Tillich, I must also think about my study of Kierkegaard who, though I felt a strong affinity to him as a person and thinker, repelled me as an overvaluation of his type. As far as I was concerned, the knight of faith *was* Kierkegaard despite his disclaimers to the contrary. Or to express it better, Kierkegaard was in his deepest self the spiritual approximation of this knight who has never existed and who he managed to articulate as an ideal or paradigm. What a world away from Wittgenstein one is when one holds that truth is subjectivity and a passionate relationship with the Absolute. And on the other hand, from Tillich when one holds that faith is something very difficult and dreadful rather than a fundamental support. How can such accounts be so articulate and attractive in their own right and so abominably at odds? How could they all have appealed to me as truthtelling if I wasn't even then, albeit unknowingly, committed to the subject as I am now?

– You see, I try to give the class a few examples from my own life.

I feel that I'm drawing to the end of what can be said about my undergraduate studies. It was a strung out affair that lasted eight or nine years and was only speeded up at the time I was getting close to having enough credits for my degree. Introductory French, Introductory German, History of Science, Basic Mathematics, Critical Thinking and Learning, Law and Justice in Literature, Ancient Greek History, History of Educational Ideas, Playwrighting, Introduction to the Theatre: this heterogeneity of my final assault speaks to me now of a never-failing appetite to learn as well as a growing sense of having exhausted this fount of knowledge and wisdom.

– What now? How much more of this unwisdom do we have to take?

What is truth? If Christians were truly Christians, wouldn't they subscribe to this truth with their last drop of blood? Here is where Kierkegaard seems so true and revealing. Or if truth were simply a matter of logic and reasoning, wouldn't all intelligent people have it in the main and be cleared of all difficulties by now? What word is used more to authenticate so many different things and so many variations of the same thing? What functions more as a principle of order in a limited space while ultimately breeding so much disorder? Or is one to think that a community of vested interests is innocent when it gives out to understand that the truth is with it and nowhere else? Is it simply objectivity and good reasoning that allows its members to call themselves responsible? When one sees time and time again how such external factors as fear can influence a discourse, should it be overlooked that fear and other factors are with us?

I don't know if these questions exactly capture my state of mind as I continued to slum it as a student. Certainly there was a time of indecision, a sense of being blocked and not knowing how best to proceed. With so little encouragement coming from the artistic side of my endeavours, so little in the way of good and satisfying results, I felt stymied in my attempt to climb high or, to say it more truthfully, climb over other people's heads. Although I had good reason to think that I excelled in my literary studies, I couldn't stand the thought of extending them simply as a way to make a living. Even in the less than glorious position of a part-time student struggling on the margins of the theatre world, I sensed that committing myself to literary studies in this way would be a stopping short, a not going all the way, a being satisfied with something less. Nothing could rid me of the feeling that I was destined to persist or perish, to follow through on my dream of being a writer in some bold and novel way. And of course that is not to say I didn't stumble at times, didn't lose heart and even make a few tentative efforts to go off in another direction. But all this was of relatively short duration and

paled in comparison with my desire to write myself large.

– Oh, please, write yourself large somewhere where we don't have to put up with it!

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