

Pre-Kendal Memories - Brad Angell - April 1, 1995

I taught philosophy at various colleges for forty years from 1949 to 1989. Philosophy is characterized not by its conclusions, but by the questions it explores. These questions fall under three big headings: 1) the nature of reality as a whole, 2) the nature of knowledge and 3) the nature of values. Metaphysics, Epistemology and Logic, and Ethics and Aesthetics.

I finally chose that profession when I was 27 after graduating from college in political science, working for a year in government, and taking a year of graduate work in government administration.

Why did I do it? Philosophy is not considered practical and I have always wanted do something useful for others. It is not particularly well-paying, and professional philosophers are often viewed with some disdain.

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I was very close to my paternal grandmother. When I was three I remember standing in front of her and remarking on the fact that everything seem to come in three's: I was three years old, I stood three feet tall and there were three of us brothers. This is the first memory I have of trying to draw a general conclusion.

When I was six of seven I used to run in to my grandmother's room first thing in the morning and crawl into bed so she could tell me stories from the Bible and John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

I was a serious boy. When I was ten I begged my parents to let me join the congregational church to which my family belonged. I took the appropriate classes, didn't really understand the theology that I was supposed to learn, but was admitted to membership, and dreamed earnestly of someday being a great leader like Jesus.

A bit later I got hold of a philosophy book one lazy summer day, while lolling about in my cousin's summer home. It said, among other things, that the table in front of me wasn't really made of solid wood as I thought, but was a collection of very small atoms and molecules separated from one another and moving rapidly about but held together by attractive forces. Further, the colors which I thought belong to the table and trees and flowers and sky weren't really where I thought they were; they were really in my head. What was outside of my head, in objective reality, was only colorless atoms and molecules and light waves, which also have no color though they cause the colors in my head which I thought were in the trees and flowers. This, the book said, was what science had discovered and it suggested that the great successes of science were evidence that this is the real objective truth.

I think it was a bit after this that I asked my grandmother how she knew that what I saw as red wasn't what she saw as green. She said "Oh, go long with you!". But I was really interested and still don't know the answer.

In the seventh or eighth grade I was fascinated by a course in biology; for the first time I learned about the processes inside my stomach - it had never occurred to me to think about that. As a project, I made a model of the digestive tract. Later in high school I took physics and learned about mechanics and fossils and evolution. Again I was fascinated and loved science and geometry.

At some point I became convinced that there could not be a God. I continued to go to the Congregational church because my parents insisted, but on walking home with my best friend I would take the sermon apart. It was very stimulating. Somewhere around this time I wrote an adolescent poem about my change in world-views; whereas all had seemed warm and beautiful and purposeful and governed by a divine and loving creator, now it was really dark and meaningless and pointless. I resonated with, but took small comfort in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, which I memorized - "Out of the night which covers me, black as a pit from pole to pole, I thank what ever gods may be for my unconquerable soul". As program chairman for the young people's society I challenged our minister to debate whether there was a God or not. He agreed, but he seemed amused and to my surprise, undaunted by my arguments. Somewhat later his daughter invited me on a date to hear Benny Goodman.

I was having too much fun to be really devastated by my thoughts, but they were part of the changing views of my teens. Besides, it wasn't too long before it occurred to me that science hadn't proved that there is not a God. One could be a great scientist, I learned, as Newton was, and hold that God created the atoms and molecules and solar system and the laws of physics.

My folks taught me to respect truth and speak truthfully. I latched on to that and expanded it. I wanted to know what really exists in the world outside of me - what exists independently of what I might wish were there, or might think was there. I still do. I admired people who stoically accepted truths they didn't like. I could not understand how other people could accept the benefits of science and pay homage to it then go to church on Sunday and mouth words inconsistent with the implications of a scientific world-view. The opposition between traditional Christian religion and science seemed obvious.

At the same time I began to think about what I really knew and what I didn't know. One of my teachers in Bronxville High School - he was supposed to be teaching current events - said that Socrates had said the the wise man is the man who knows what he doesn't know.¹ He drew a picture of a circle representing what a person knows, and pointed out that the larger the circle gets, the greater the circumference - the more you are in contact with what you don't know.

Around this time I joined the Quakers. We had attended Quaker meetings at Chappaqua in the summer, and I was impressed by the fact that the Quakers who spoke did not pretend to be

¹ I have looked for that quote in passage attributed to Socrates and never found it. But Socrates did say that the Oracle at Delphi had said Socrates was the wisest man because Socrates did not claim to know what he did not know.

telling others what the truth was - they simply said, with conviction, what they believed in a religious way. We had fundamentalists, and deists, and others of more liberal stripe. I listened and felt I learned from all of them.

I tried to start a philosophy club in HS. It held one meeting and collapsed. One of the group - George Hull, who was later my roommate at Swarthmore - was more interested in peering at the stars through telescopes, and I've forgotten what the others were interested in, but it wasn't philosophy.

During the summer before I went to college, I was intrigued with the question of how one knows that other people exist and have minds. After all, I can't see into another person's head. It seemed that I couldn't really prove that other people existed at all; all I had was my own experiences of them. How could one get outside of one's own experiences? At this point I had a frightening experience. One day while thinking of this, I was cutting tall grass with a sickle on the lawn of our summer home and my mother was digging up weeds a short distance away. In one of my vigorous swings the sickle flew out of my hands and almost hit my mother. The horror that it might have hit her clashed traumatically with the recognition that I had been thinking that perhaps she didn't really exist. It hit me that philosophical ideas have real implications and one needs to think them through very carefully.

Swarthmore was heaven to me. Suddenly, I found that there were many students and teachers interested in the very things I was most interested in. It was the theoretical questions which really intrigued me. But I majored in economics and political science because I thought I should do something to help society. It was the Roosevelt years 1936 to 1940, and our country was struggling to pull out of the depression. My father, a real estate man, had been reduced from riches to rags as it were, through no fault of his own. I blamed the economic system and thought, with Roosevelt, that the way to help people was through economic initiatives by the federal government. I studied economics and political science. I hated accounting and money and banking, but loved economic theory; I hated politics but loved political theory. I thought I was preparing myself for a political career.

Finally, after a year in social work, a year in graduate school at Penn learning about local and state government, and a couple of years in the army as a medic in World War II, I decided I wasn't made for politics. I could not put my heart into the kind of politicking I saw in Division headquarters where I worked - trying to build a contingent of friends and supporters and making the compromises and concessions that any good politician has to make. I was simply more at home analyzing ideas and arguments and seeking answers to the kinds of questions that philosophers have always asked. More important, I was struck by the lack of ethical standards among American soldiers when in foreign territory. I thought that perhaps it was important for some people to try to develop a more rational approach to ethics; one more solid than those resting on popular opinion or on ambiguous and inadequate religious cliches. Further, I decided that probably an individual could help others best by doing what they were best suited to do and

most interested in doing.

So while still overseas I wrote a letter to John Dewey. I had read a book of his called "How we think", and an article of his in Fortune magazine which struck a chord. I asked if I could meet with him, and he kindly wrote back saying I could. When I got back home, I went to his apartment off Central Park. He met me at the door in a sports shirt and invited me in. He had me sit on his right on the sofa, since he said he was a bit deaf in the left ear. I tried to sketch out for him my outline of a rather grand philosophical system. He didn't particularly pick up on that, but he did encourage me to apply to Columbia or the University of California, Berkeley, or Harvard. Later in graduate school when I had read many of his books in great detail, I realized that the approach I had outlined was diametrically opposed to much that he advocated; in fact it was an approach which I too would soon abandon.

I applied to all three schools and was accepted. I don't know why; my record was not that great. I think the graduate schools were bleeding for lack of students during the war. I went to talk with Irwin Edman, then Chairman of the Philosophy Department at Columbia. He asked what I was interested in. I told him my plans and he said he thought he could arrange things so I could do just the things I wanted to do. A bit later I went up to Harvard. The secretary, Ruth Allen, (later a good friend) acted as if she could care less whether I came to Harvard or not. The Chairman, C.I. Lewis - then on his way to becoming one of the three outstanding American philosophers of his period - informed me that if I came I would have to take courses in Ancient Philosophy and Modern Philosophy, logic and ethics. At that time I couldn't see what I could learn from philosophers like Plato and Aristotle who lived over two thousand years ago and knew nothing of modern science. Further, he informed me dryly that only 25% of those who enter the graduate program actually get their Ph.D.s.

I decided to go to Harvard - not so much for its name, as because I felt I had allowed myself too much freedom in progressive schools and even at Swarthmore; I should go some place where I was forced to study rigorously what others had done before me. But also Harvard was the home of many of America's greatest philosophers: William James the pragmatist, Santayana the materialist, Alfred North Whitehead, and Josiah Royce the Absolute Idealist. When I was there it had the leading philosophers of logical analysis.

Harvard was a second heaven for me. Those few years introduced me to thinkers and questions and problems which have kept me going ever since. I see real progress in the inquiry, but no end to the questions.

My high school teacher's comment is still with me, deepened and buttressed by the thought of centuries of earlier thinkers. I am convinced that there are questions about the ultimate nature of reality I can never, as a human being, know the answer to.

If wisdom is knowing what it is that I don't know, I am a wise man. For I do not know, or pretend to know, whether the great objective real world of which I and my experiences are a real, but extremely small, part, is 1) strictly and solely a world of physical laws and forces - as the

stunning, enormous advances and successes of science suggest to many thinkers, or 2) a world in which the wonder and beauty, the exhilaration and tragedies which are essential, real parts of all human experience are parts of a grand design guided by a cosmic spirit, intelligent beyond our comprehension that is aware of trillions of beings and processes simultaneously and guiding the whole complex history towards an ever more beatific goal. Both views can not be true at once, and I have found reasons to support and reasons to doubt both of them. What I do not doubt is the wonder and excitement of being alive and thinking, and the deep deep mystery of how it all has come about.