

Awakening to Philosophical Life

Essays Personal and Impersonal



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Preface. The One who Philosophizes

‘To be awake is to be alive.’

–Thoreau, *Walden*

I have my doubts about memoir as a genre of philosophizing. Also, and for a similar reason, about that of fantasy. The more I reflect upon the past two years during which I have awoken to philosophical life, the more I realize that concentration on particular experiences alone cannot but amount to an overlong course in self-misunderstanding, confusion, and strife. Particular experiences cannot be locked up within themselves and kept to themselves but must lead beyond their narrow residence, allowing themselves to be opened and pierced by the whole. Experience is a bivouac; also, a world seen in a grain of sand.

It is sometimes said that ours is an Age of Anxiety. It is also said that everyone who is famous, tolerably old, or publicly esteemed is now inclined to sit down in order to complete his memoir. Yet never is it said that such an age and such a genre may be closely related or, more damningly so, that memoir may indeed be the genre that is most uniquely suited for the unfit time in which we live. For in both cases, it seems incumbent on the writer to approach his personal experiences with an eye to shaping them solely on the level of historical accident, foible, and peculiarity. It does not occur to the definite I who includes in his memoir the colorful details of his past five years, nor indeed would it, to rise above a state of finite individuality in order to conceive the contours of his existence in the light of all existence.

Worse yet, it could turn out that the continuous acts of remembering, fantasizing, and forecasting—the stream of near-endless particulars illumined by the continuous lines of thoughts upon them—are nothing save

deleterious exercises in their own right: deleterious not just because they teach one to concentrate on the wrong kinds of objects but also because they seduce one into believing that particulars in the guise and varnish of particulars matter greatly in an ultimate account of a well-considered life.

If, however, I have learned anything during the time I have spent as a philosophical guide for those whose lives have been brought into the question, it is that each conversation partner must be taught to move from the 'I who experiences' to 'the one who philosophizes.' Inquiring, rather than venting or confiding, 'actively listening' or passively ignoring, makes this transformation possible. In one interview in *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, Pierre Hadot offers up the thought that philosophy may begin in personal experience but this awakening to philosophy is an adoption of an existential attitude toward the basic questions of living. These 'basic questions of living' occur to me but transcend my finite existence; they emerge in my time but go beyond my years; they shape my moral character but the nature of my character is poured from a general cast of mind. They enliven me—this is true—yet only by dint of coursing through my being; and while their beginning is contingent, their reason for being is necessary.

Understanding this bundle of provocative claims requires some patience, discernment, and finesse. For on the one hand, there can be no sense made of the mystical view that the final aim of human life in this all too human world is to ascend, ultimately, beyond the specificity of human experience. On the other hand, there can be nothing but confusion and despair (or ignorance and boredom) so long as one believes that the 'I who experiences' ranks most highly in the table of all existence. Mysticism, without body, is death; solipsism, without soul, is *ennui*. This is to say that mysticism troublingly eradicates the 'I who experiences' while lyricism fetishizes it, singing its false praises. Where skepticism denies the possibility of transcendence, solipsism refuses even to consider it, to pay it heed or give it a hearing.

We are speaking of all varia of entanglements. Yet only philosophy as a way of life takes seriously the indefinite impersonal: the one who philosophizes is the one who honors selfhood and worldhood by taking a disinterested interest—where applicable, experiencing a sense of confusion and

bewilderment, of reverential awe and joy, of calmness and gentleness—in whatever falls to earth. Philosophy—by which I mean the search for goodness when seen under the aspect of beauty—cannot be my keepsake or my sole possession, yet I can allow it to touch and transform me, to hold me in lucidity.

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These, no doubt, are some rather peculiar claims to make about philosophizing, especially in the context of the personal essay, that 'irregular undigested piece,' which in Dr. Johnson's witty phrasing would seem to disqualify the genre as a mode in which one could possibly philosophize. Short in length, ornately styled, a first trial of newborn (sometimes, let it be conceded: stillborn) ideas, the personal essay certainly invites the charges of intellectual shottiness, of amateurism, of being woefully 'unphilosophic.'

Since its inception, the form has doubtless been tempted and, in too many instances, too readily seduced by solipsism, and yet it has also resisted this temptation, transmogrifying itself into a 'concrete universal,' an I who experiences ascending to the one who philosophizes—and returning all the richer. When Montaigne, the inventor of the personal essay as a genre of prose writing, first retired to his tower in 1580 and started scrawling quotes on the ceiling, his only aim was to surround himself with his friends, who were none other than wise and just men of antiquity. But soon he got the idea of writing down the quotes he loved (a form of chanting perhaps?), then of commenting on them (a kind of tutelage?), then of musing about them and mulling them over, and finally, as if by accident, his scribblings grew into his sprawling, fecund, thickish book containing three volumes of thin, lively essays. Somehow or other, in the felicitous words of the late Robert Nozick, Montaigne was trying, during the fecund leisure afforded by old age and good fortune, to 'grow up more.'

Sometimes it can seem—and I am thinking especially of the moments in which Montaigne is writing about his regular shitting or about the diminutive size of his cock—that he is engaging our prurient interests in topics close enough to gossip, in scenes that can readily be likened to

spectacle. In some cases, the verdict can only be rendered as guilt. And yet, a charitable reading of Montaigne's essays would invite us to draw a distinction between Montaigne's stated, explicit subject (shit or youthful sex or his peculiar habits of eating) and the implied significance: the lightness and weightiness of being human, the lessons to be read off of his personal anecdotes, the disinterested interest to be taken in the meaning of being an embodied, sentient, intellective, humorous creature. Here, we do well to follow Wittgenstein, noting the difference between what is said and what is unsaid but revealed.

It is as if the process by which we begin to philosophize were teaching us to think of any event occurring on any given day of our lives as being subject to—indeed, as being *in potentia* submitted to—broader, wider, further considerations. An event befalls us, and, while falling, falls under the aspect of the world. At the same time, each felicitous essay that is written from this more speculative point of view is, like any good philosophical conversation we may have the good luck to participate in, also a consideration 'of itself.' An essay about attention must also and at the same time be an embodiment of, a performance in, an exercise in the art of attention. If it is not, then it lacks something: the most significant part. When it is well-wrought, however, a personal essay becomes a spiritual exercise of attending properly to the subject matter given to one to care for.

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I am dancing around the edges of philosophical autobiography, a subject that has been on my mind since I first began writing the personal essays included in *Awakening to Philosophical Life*. For quite a while, I have been wondering how philosophizing relates to the daily account of a philosopher's life. His actions, his words, and his demeanor—not to mention the manner in which he eats his food or the pleasantness of his company—would all be matters worthy of scrutiny. Philosophical autobiography would be a genre concerned with giving an account of how one has lived.

Specifically, it would, as a genre, be the name we give to the form in which the one who learns to philosophize comes to embody philosophical life. The

jury is still out whether this collection of essays, which were written the two-year period beginning in January of 2011, adequately shows this transformation or full embodiment. I humbly hope they do, but I would also be tempted to write in all of the margins the ungainly platitude: 'work in progress.'

The gift bestowed upon the philosopher is at once to lead, and to show others how to lead, a philosophical life before our deaths make us a kindly visitation. To be sure, no reasonable person expects an accountant or an athlete, just in virtue of being a good accountant or an excellent athlete, to be a morally good person, but one should have the expectation not just that philosophers *are* morally good persons but also that the activity we call philosophy should *make* one into a *better* human being. The common objection runs that even the best of modern philosophers did not make for the most pleasant dinner companions: Kant could be a pedant, Schopenhauer was most surely a pessimist, and Heidegger became a Nazi. However, it is usually then conceded that philosophers, though capable of thinking logically, live about as well as the rest of us. The better ones, it is muttered, may owe this much to luck.

As it happens, this objection is based on a mistaken assumption concerning the supposedly autonomous realms of thinking and living, theory and practice, reason and emotion. It is an assumption that we do well to reject. Philosophizing is not, as Hadot has capably illustrated, a theoretical discourse but the rigorous exercises of thinking and living, of reasoning and forming performed all at once. Philosophy, much like any rigorous discipline, is a practice, only in this case it is a practice not in one activity or endeavor but in the art of living one's life. Following Hadot's example, therefore, I have treated each personal essay in *Awakening to Philosophical Life* as a kind of spiritual exercise: each was to be a meditation aimed less at informing the pupil about a state of affairs than at transforming the philosopher's perception of the world.

I believe I am warranted in saying, then, that 'philosophical autobiography' is the form of writing charged with spelling out three important conditions. First of all, it is tasked with revealing the process by which one is transformed from the pre-philosophical to the philosophical, from the

definite I to the indefinite one. This process may be likened to an awakening or to a conversion experience: it is a change of heart, a sense of 'growing up more,' a coming to oneself. Second, it consists, however obliquely, of the kinds of spiritual exercises that seek to change one's way of being, making it possible for one to become—in a formula gently lifted from my forthcoming book, *Radiance: An Essay for Unsettled Time*—'a master in the practice of living.' The first and second conditions go hand-in-hand, spiritual exercises being the chief mode by which the transformation is effected. Finally, philosophical autobiography is intended to reveal that the one so transformed is leading an exemplary existence, the sort of existence that percipient observers would also find estimable and attractive. The exemplar, whether he intends as much, is setting himself up to be a guide for those willing to become his pupils. Spiritual exercises, self-transformation, and exemplarity are, it seems to me, three different vantage points from which to view with greater breadth and better attention the figure appearing in the form of the philosopher.

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The provenance of this book is, as with all good things, at once contingent and providential. The 40-odd personal essays selected for inclusion in this volume date back to January of 2011 and were written over the course of two years with no other intention apart from the desire to understand myself more completely. Over time, the daily exercises I have undertaken herein have had the beneficial consequence of humbling my immature pretensions, of making me into a better human being, and of clarifying what is for me the most fundamental question for our time, the question concerning the most excellent way of being and of how one sets about doing so. The right question may take years to hit upon and more than a decade to formulate properly; both are blessings I hope, like love, never to take for granted.

The itinerary of *Awakening to Philosophical Life* amounts, more or less, to a philosophical review of the three-plus years I spent in New York City. One long-form essay that never made it into print was intended to be an account of what it means to live philosophically today in what, on first acquaintance, would seem to be the most unphilosophical of cities: a

'bonfire of the vanities'; a place of status-seeking, pleasure-seeking, the needless and ruthless acquisition of wealth, the hazardous course of perpetual overwork, and the wielding of indiscriminate power. With a wry smile, I suppose I beg to differ. For the essay that never appeared, this book becomes its more suitable replacement, a gift left with bowed hands at the altar.

The route I have followed in this book begins with some reflections, in Part 1, on growing up in rural Wisconsin, then in Part 2 provides the reader with some sense of my life while I resided in the Upper East Side near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (The very American leitmotif of 'moving on up' may not be lost on the perceptive reader.) Part 3, 'Nature's Silent Course,' consists of a handful of literary sketches of Woodstock, New York, sketches that were lovingly stenciled during the first week of May in 2012. Part 4 is comprised of musings—some light, others dark—on the various shades of ethical life while Part 5 examines the significant loss of manners in modern social life. Parts 6 and 7 are spiritual exercises concerned, respectively, with the mystery of worldly existence and with a death that is mine. Part 8, fittingly, concludes this volume of essays with my farewell to New York and with my first impressions of what it means to live simply amid the gentle mountains of rural Appalachia. I hope, if nothing else, that these essays strike the reader as acts of love and generosity; if they serve to inspire, all the better.

Along the course, I can safely say that I have been humbled by my own errors of judgment (of which there are many), awed by the exuberance flowing from simply being attentive, and inspired by a radiant vision of being casting its everywhere light upon this lovely, blessed existence. My love tells me that I am 'resting into myself'; I find myself that is oneself wholeheartedly agreeing.

Self-Portrait



I'm a Ph.D.-trained philosopher who teaches individuals and organizations throughout the US and Europe how to inquire into the things that matter most. A former resident of the Upper East Side in New York City, I now lead a simpler, more contemplative life amid the gentle mountains of rural Appalachia. My virtual home is andrewjamestaggart.com.