

Why Philosophize? Chapter 6 – Fragment 1

I

In some quarters in the United States there is felt to be a great threat to the autonomy and the flourishing of their state apparatus from influences of what *they* take to be heathen powers threatening their way of life. So they react violently against such orders, or what they take to be such orders, though these alleged or actual orders are certainly incapable of overthrowing the United States and probably could not change it to what they take to be in their favor. Usually, capitalism itself is not the problem for these alleged or real challenging orders, or at least not a central problem.

Let us return to our comparison between Sweden and Saudi Arabia. Sweden has, as we have in part seen, robust welfare provisions. Saudi Arabia has little in the way of that. An unelected authoritarian state government repeatedly uses some of its vast wealth to give some considerable sums of money out to its population and for its own purposes, to wit purposes determined by its crown princes. This largesse, as you may call it, is done at the crown princes' own discretion. One might, *perhaps* and not without reason cynically, say that they do this to keep the people quiet and docile; to in effect buy them off. In this way they avoid at least to some extent social unrest and keep things nicely in a social order that benefits the crown princes and their principal hangers-on. And this in a world where the crown princes swim in wealth and sometimes 'contribute' to gender equality and women's rights and their dignity and way of life by keeping harems.

It is—or so it seems to me—close to self-evident to say that Sweden now is a better society than Saudi Arabia. It is fairer, more just, and people living there have more autonomy and lives that are better. They have a better education, better health care and more control over their own lives. There also less suffering and exploitation and more opportunities. There is something approaching

gender-equality. There is, in short, a better form of life with a more reasonable world-picture. Can't this be established? But perhaps not without thought or knowledge of how things go or can go and some widely shared convictions (considered judgments), even convictions shared by *some* Saudis. But this can be established and seen to be so without any philosophy or philosophical knowledge or presuppositions. Philosophical understanding will not refute or refine our understanding of this or set us on firmer ground. Philosophy here is a free-spinning wheel that turns no machinery. We can, of course, say that all such thought, if it has any credible claim to soundness, is philosophical or presupposes philosophy. But there are no credible grounds for saying that. To claim there is such a philosophical presupposition is mere arm-waving.

Indeed, I have spoken of a better life, of equality, fairness, justice, of harms, benefits, burdens, and exploitation. But none of this requires or needs or presupposes philosophy or even some philosophical understanding. One, for example, does not have to know what the correct analysis of equality is (even assuming that there can be one) to know that A does not stand in equality with his neighbor B when A has a large swimming pool, or any swimming pool at all, and B does not have enough water to drink (as sometimes obtains between Israelis and Palestinians). We can be more sure of that than we can be of any philosophical analysis of 'equality', no matter how well thought out it is. (Say, by Rawls, Parfit or Geuss.)

Where, in what I have argued here above about a better life, equality, etc., did I make any philosophical claims, either big P or little p ones? If I claim that in certain respects at least A and B are unequal, I need not have made a philosophical remark. And if I go on to say that is a bad thing, I need not have made a philosophical remark either or presupposed some philosophy. Most evaluative or moral remarks are not philosophical nor do they presuppose any philosophy.

Many, indeed most, people—people in populations across the world—have no knowledge or understanding of or care for philosophical thought at all or presuppose any or have the slightest interest in philosophical notions. Still, it might be said that they at least unwittingly make what in

effect are some philosophical presuppositions. Well, it should be asked, what philosophical presuppositions must they make or assume in asserting moral judgments such as people need and should have water, food and shelter? Not all people who have these views are likely to have philosophical views about these matters or assume or, wittingly or unwittingly, presuppose them or indeed have any philosophical views or assumptions about anything. Not all people who reflect through this and think this is just the right way to respond are in any way philosophical oriented. If they are reflective and so respond this reflectiveness need not result from being philosophical. Being reflective may be necessary for being philosophical but it is not sufficient. Reflective people may be altogether innocent of philosophy.

For example, it may be said there are people who hate the poor. If we are Deweyians we would say whatever is *desired* with adequate factual information and careful reflection is *desirable*. But this hatred of the poor will not withstand such scrutiny. This in effect meta-ethical claim might very well be true but does everyone, or even necessarily anyone, who has that abstract conviction also have those rather specific convictions about what would lead to value a life in Sweden over a life in Saudi Arabia? Or, when asked about the above in effect meta-ethical belief, might not many reasonably and rather indifferently shrug their shoulders and say that they do not know about such abstract matters? But that notwithstanding, many firmly have rather specific convictions about equal treatment, harm, exploitation, and the like. They do not need philosophy to sustain that belief. They do not need philosophy or religion to sustain their firm conviction that people who have to go into the bush at night to relieve themselves because they have no toilets must have toilets whether this is at all possible. But see the force of this. They do not need philosophy. And indeed no philosophical reasoning could undermine that conviction. It could be said in certain circumstances that it is impossible to provide toilets and *if* true that is another matter. There can be no moral obligation to do the impossible. But the alleged impossibility to provide toilets is very problematic.

However, there are Wahhabis and Salafists who have very different and conflicting specific convictions than do egalitarians (all of them considered judgments, intentions or whatever else you want to call them) and some also have the in effect meta-ethical belief that what is desired under the conditions I have described need not be desirable and some convictions that are desirable are not desired by some people or peoples somewhere. Some will agree, that is, that what is desired is desirable if and only if it is reasonably desired with adequate information, though they would disagree on what counts as reasonable and adequate information and about how we obtain it. So how do we justify, or can we justify, that our specific convictions are right? They don't follow from knowing that what is so desired is desirable. We need specific information about what is desirable and there we have to rely on specific convictions (considered judgments), some of them specifically their own culturally considered differences. Agreement about that desired meta-ethical belief or any meta-ethical belief will not help. All sides can trumpet that what is reasonable to desire is worth desiring is desirable. But they will disagree about what it reasonable to desire or about what is worth desiring or whether it can only be what adequate factual information could reflect on or remember. Even the leaders of ISIS can trumpet that.

Suppose we reply that, looked at worldwide, many more have by now the convictions I have mentioned than those who have Wahhabist or Salafist convictions or who are in the ISIS crowd. Even if that is true, it might well in turn be responded that there is no question of getting such matters right or wrong here or even of, in a fallibilistic spirit (what else?), getting it more nearly right. Moreover, such matters are not vote issues. The big military battalions, the greater population, will not settle such matters, though those with the big battalions now in fact do.

I think that researchers and intellectuals in scholar-oriented institutions are more likely to get it right than researchers (if they even can be properly called that) in Wahhabist or Salafist institutions or, for that matter, in such institutions with a Yeshivas or Christian Fundamentalist orientation. (Is this even true of Jesuit institutions?) Is this a *parti pris* arbitrary belief or attitude

of mine, a *prejudice* in favor of a secular orientation? Is it not the case that the convictions of someone reasoning over such matters at Harvard University, the Sorbonne, Heidelberg University or Uppsala University are more likely to get it right than someone researching these matters at a university in Saudi Arabia or a Fundamentalist Christian university or a Yeshivas? Is it plausible to respond that if I say yes that this is just a prejudice of mine? I do not think so. But how am I to ward that off if, when I am pushed, I end up just appealing to my practices, my form of life, my world-view? I do not *think* that is so, but *thinking does not* make something so. Descartes had a lot of time to reflect. But then what does, if anything, make something so? Are we *au contraire* back with Wittgenstein on forms of life? Even if one form of life or cluster of forms of life becomes pervasive, so what? If one goes the Harvard, etc. way rather than the Saudi Arabian Wahhabist way, are we not both here just appealing to authority? And doesn't this go for ISIS as well? Do we not, whoever we are, just have different spade turnings here with no possible way of getting a non-question begging answer concerning which way to turn our spades is right? I certainly do not think so. But I do not know how to answer that question.

Still it seems to me that there are evaluative contrasts that could be made—for example, between South Korea and North Korea, Sweden and Saudi Arabia, and ISIS and the Obama-Kerry group—to decide with whom it would be better to side (we could share Tariq Ali's appraisal of Obama and still side with him against ISIS) and clearly and objectively where it would be better to live. Here these matters both empirically and morally (normatively) are resolvable and decisively so. The two matters—the empirical and the moral—are working here in tandem. But without those rather obvious morally relevant empirical matters being in place these moral claims would plainly not be sustainable. I deployed the Sweden/Saudi Arabia paradigm case to make clear how such matters can be objectively resolved. But *when pushed*, do I not just rely on assertion and not argument? But is it only argument—sound argument—that rationally and reasonably resolves things and can it always resolve things? Must it be or can it be our final appeal? Is there a final

appeal or does argument, other than purely logical mathematical argument, in order to be decisive have to rely on empirical facts in tandem with moral facts? And are not the logical-mathematical ones empty? But can empirical facts, logical facts (e.g., if A is to the right of B and B is to the right of C, then C is to the right of A) or moral facts (e.g., respect for human life is a fundamental good) be held in tandem? And what should be said when empirical facts and moral facts conflict? I do not know how to answer these questions or how to settle, except arbitrarily, such issues. Philosophy has batted around these questions for millennia but not settled them. Is there any good reason to believe it might someday succeed? Or are these questions unanswerable and as such not real questions but only at best sighs of the human heart? When we first think to philosophize, we search for answers here. But are we only led around by the nose here with nothing to be had over such matters from philosophy or anything else? Should we not say farewell to philosophy? Or do we have too narrow a fare here?

We know that logical argument unaided will not do the job. Nor will Kant-type appeals to pure reason or Humean/Smithian appeals to the moral sentiments. After all, moral sentiments differ. How do we get the right sentiments? But even those of us who are not in accordance with Obama-ism, when we consider his wretched social order recognize it is wonderful compared with the order ISIS would impose. We can know which order is the better without a shadow of doubt. Still, Obama is caught between a rock and a hard place. If he degrades and destroys ISIS as is *just taken in itself* surely morally mandatory, will he not create such hatred in Sunni nations that there will, perhaps not in the immediate future but eventually, be such hatred engendered against the Americans that still more and at least as extreme and brutal Jihadist forces will come into existence to fight against the brutal ways of the Americans and more moderate Islamic forces? This is a terrible human problem. It is not in itself *simply* a moral problem. The purely moral answer is clear. But it is a practical problem with dreadful moral implications that has, as far as I can see, no realistic answer. I do not know what Obama and his team should do and I doubt they do either. It

will be to no avail to appeal to some *real politik* political realist. They could only rely on power politics where whichever society has the most power and the most ingenuity will win out and that will be the right thing, if we speak of right at all. But that reveals the moral paucity of such a 'realism'. With money and power there is choice. I fear that is how it will go. Oh, what a wonderful world.