

ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE FELT SENSE

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(transcribed, edited & slightly transmogrified by Peter Afford)

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You may lose me in the first part, I'm going to talk about philosophy. The second half of what I have to say will be understandable, I promise. The reason philosophy is hard to understand is that it's not possible to say what philosophy is. If I can make clear why you cannot say what philosophy is, then you will understand it - in a way I will have said what philosophy is.

In all other fields one says something, but when you write a sentence in philosophy you don't just say something, you also say how it is possible to say such a thing. You might want to say something about human nature or clients or all of us: we behave like this, people do that. If it's philosophy you might say the same thing, but at the same time you would ask yourself - "where did I get that? what's the reason for my saying that? how am I able to say that?"

The question behind it is not just "where did I get this?" but "how can one ever say anything?" You might answer "well, because I've experienced it myself". You would have to ask yourself what kind of connection there is between an experiencing and a saying. From your experience, which seems to you that you can say this & this, one might say something else, because experience and saying are not the same thing. So what is the connection between experiencing and saying?

You don't write a sentence in philosophy without that kind of awareness. You write a plain sentence and then you look at it and you say "this is ridiculous - I'm saying I experienced it myself, and I realise I don't know what I mean when I say 'I', and I don't know what I mean when I say 'myself', and I don't know what I mean when I say 'experience', so what am I saying?"

You change the sentence and you add certain turns in order to take care of that - you never write just one sentence. You've written a lot to get to that sentence, then you change the sentence to take account of all of that. You get a sentence that nobody can read! The students want to know - "why does this have to be so complicated that I can hardly read it?"

That would be enough in itself, but a further fact is that there are always many different ways in philosophy. When I say there are many ways, I'm being vague on purpose. If I were to say more specifically what it means to say there are many ways, then I would already be in one philosophy or another. I'd be in a philosophy that works by looking at our tools for thinking - concepts, sentences, strategies, methods, approaches. Other philosophies proceed differently. For example, they might look at how we live with each other before analysing the tools of thinking.

The whole story I'm telling you is only one way to talk about philosophy. Another person might say - "you have to start with biology, Gendlin is always talking about methods and concepts and so on, he didn't explain philosophy correctly at all". It's pretty well understood in philosophy that that's how it is. The classical philosophies understood this very well and then found a special trick to break through that situation. There are several different special tricks to get through this situation. So that's my second point.

In our time, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dilthey would be the three to mention who have made a critique of the usual concepts and approach in western culture. They are very different and have become very influential. They speak as if in western culture there was only one philosophical approach, which they criticise. In one sense it's a mistake, because there is not just one approach in

western culture, which is too big to have just one approach; in another sense, it's a very important move. I've already made clear why it's a mistake. Why it's important is that even though there are many approaches, there is one which dominates and which controls the public discourse. So one important thing which Heidegger and Wittgenstein and Dilthey and philosophy can give you is the awareness that you're living in a public world which is dominated by a particular approach. That is already true, but the awareness helps a lot.

As a client-centred therapist and as a focusing person, there are many things that you want to say to your colleagues and your friends which you cannot say. You're aware of that. You say it alright, but it doesn't get through. The dominant approach and the philosophy and the modes of thinking and the habits are such that if you try to tell an ordinary person something from focusing or client-centred therapy, it doesn't make any sense to them. That's not because they're philosophers, it's the opposite. If they were philosophers, you could at least communicate with them and say these and these assumptions you're making are the things we are changing. With someone who hasn't studied philosophy you can't do that very well.

You know this approach that's dominant because you run into it all the time: everything is a combination of little parts. Everything is like a machine, living things too. Everything is studied and assumed to be made out of little units that somebody put together, as if it were artificial. It's assumed that everything is made out of parts which you can define. That by itself is already much if you can understand it. That's all I'm going to say, just if I can make that clear.

I'm making something clear which you already know, but not to think about. I'm starting a sentence and I'm saying in order to explain something, I can't finish the sentence. To explain what 'explain' means, we're of course explaining what 'explain' means, so we're already explaining in the way that we assume 'explaining' works. Now, if we can do that much we're already far ahead, because then we can think later about maybe changing that. Maybe there's another way to explain, not only to explain what 'explaining' is but to explain anything else. But let's just stay here and explain what 'explaining' is the way we're used to it.

To 'explain' usually in our culture means to go back to an earlier time and find all the little pieces with which, if you re-arrange them, you can then get the thing you're trying to explain at a later time. So in a way we're always showing that everything was already here. Laplace said "if you tell me where the atoms are at any given moment and where they're going and in which direction and how fast, I will tell you the entire past and the entire future". The funny assumption in that mode of explaining, which nobody would grant if you said it out loud, is that nothing ever really happens - it was already there.

You can observe in yourself as well as other people that that's the only kind of explanation that we're used to, that we assume is an explanation. If a client comes up with something new, where does that come from? Everything is supposed to have already been there, otherwise you don't explain it.

I have created an alternative model to that one. I went further than Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dilthey. Here comes the modest version: I was able to do this only because I had read Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dilthey! The relationship is such that I could also do something new from them - but this cannot be explained. As long as we assume that 'explain' means what it usually means, everything should have been in Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dilthey already and it shouldn't be possible for me to do anything new. Or, if I did, it's inexplicable. I can't tell you much about this new model: I'm going to put it on the Internet! I called it "a process model".

Something you can take home with you in addition to the explanation about 'explanation': there are three kinds of philosophy. You already know two, but you're not conscious of it. One is the one I've already told you about that consists of little pieces and you put them together. That mode of

philosophy has the incredible power that it can use logic, because logic begins only after you have small units and you keep them fixed. You all know this from mathematics - if you start with 237, you're not allowed to lose one of those or say the 112th one is my uncle and therefore it's worth more. Logic is incredibly powerful because you can go many steps with pure logical inference, you can go, go, go. You can get to some very new place with logical inference.

Logic is necessary only if you keep the units fixed and you have them already. The conclusion from logic is only worth something as long as the pieces stay cut the way you cut them. The moment you change even one of them, the whole logic disappears. You should never be trapped by logic and say "it's this way and this way and this way and therefore I must, it must be like that" - it doesn't have to be like that. If you open up any little unit, you're free from the logic.

The second kind of philosophy you know operates with wholes, my favourite example is ecology. In ecology we're used to thinking about the whole: not just these trees but the whole of nature, and not just the whole of nature but the whole world, and not only the whole world but the whole planet, and not just the planet because up there beyond the planet is a hole and too much heat comes through there and so on. Any factor in that whole can change all the rest of the factors in the whole. Can you see that that's totally different? Instead of the parts staying fixed, any change in one already changes all the others. You can use both kinds of philosophy to think about something.

The third one is not as well known: to have a certain unity but not the whole system - a local whole. You can say the self is a whole or the human being is a whole, or society is a whole instead of just parts. You can create or consider something as a local whole. If I said to create a local whole, I would have fallen into that philosophy which assumes we create everything. If I say instead to look at it as a local whole, then I'm in a different philosophy - I'm saying it is a certain way but how you look at it has a certain influence. I would never say (but somebody would!) that certain things simply are local wholes and that's the truth of it. I would never simply say "human nature is that way". (I just lied, I said it yesterday!).

If you really become aware that there are all of these philosophies, and if you also become aware that in a particular historical time one of them is dominant, even in your own habits... there is a place where philosophy gets stuck, can you feel that already?

By post-modern is meant the felt sense which you have now. There is this variety, there are all these approaches, the special way of dealing with the variety, there's a variety of those also, and besides that each historical time has its own dominant approach and so those dominant approaches are in your own habits, and you won't live long enough to overcome that, and you can't go to another culture to live all over again, so you are stuck! In Chicago in November I arranged a philosophical conference called "after post-modernism" - that's no easy thing!

My second half is: what does the whole situation look like if you know something about a felt sense? It changes, because you have not only all these different approaches and concepts and methods, you also have a felt sense.

Someone says immediately "what is a felt sense?" - he wants to translate the felt sense into concepts, and the moment you do that you're going to be lost again. If you're going to explain the felt sense, then we're lost - you're going to explain it in one kind of 'explain' or another.

If you look at the history of philosophy with a felt sense in mind, you discover that others have found it too already. Plato knew this. He made a method where you define something and then you apply it, and when you apply it enough you find cases where it doesn't work, and then you have only a felt sense.

When you created the definition you already knew something. What you knew before the definition you still know, even if the definition breaks. Not only do you know what you knew before, but the definition breaks for certain reasons, so the felt sense contains more than before. You can create a second definition from this richer felt sense, and that one will also break, they will always break. It's a big tragedy that all definitions break!

It was no tragedy for Plato, it was his method to break every definition and then to create a new one which will also break. Plato wrote treatises which end with 'tchok!' and other treatises which end with some kind of definition, and people misunderstand the whole thing, and they divided Plato into positive and negative works - it's nonsense, it doesn't matter whether you stop with a definition and know it will break tomorrow, or whether you stop with where the definition breaks.

I learnt a tremendous amount from Dilthey. Dilthey is in style again, but it's not my Dilthey they've discovered. The history of philosophy is already very different if you know about a felt sense, because you will see it everywhere and Wittgenstein and Dilthey make much more sense.

We need a relationship between the felt sense and concepts. Concepts build the world. As a therapist & a focusing person there's a sense in which you're not in the world; it may not bother you that you cannot make any concepts. But the world doesn't change without concepts. We need concepts to build something and to communicate. The relationship between a felt sense and concepts I call 'carrying forward'. It's cute to call it 'carrying forward' because it turns out the word 'metaphor' in Greek means carrying forward .

There would be much to say about this carrying forward relationship. What you say is never the same thing as the felt sense, this is a short-hand formulation. By this I don't mean what post-moderns mean, this is not negative. You might say "I give up, I can never say what it is, I'll shut up" - that would be post-modern. I don't mean that you can't say anything, I mean that when you say something you expand and continue, you carry the felt sense further.

Sometimes when you go to the movies with somebody you analyse it afterwards and it dies, and then you're sorry you ever analysed it. We therapists and focusing people, we already know that. The opposite exists too, don't forget - with some people if you go to the movies and you discuss it afterwards, it grows: first you just had a pretty inchoate felt sense, but as you discuss it you discover oh! this and that and that and it becomes so huge, and that means carrying forward.

Now I am where you all know what I'm talking about because this is focusing. We have learnt to stay with the felt sense until we can say something that expands it and carries it forward. That's a secret still. You don't have to talk for an hour about the movie and then go home and say "oh, it died". You can look every moment to see if what you're saying expands it and gives it more life or kills it. And that's focusing.

What can we say about living and the felt sense and experiencing, so that we could understand that relationship? How shall we carry this fact of carrying forward, forward? If I don't get any further than that question, I'm satisfied. Instead of setting up one system that's going to explain 'explaining', we want to set it up so that we can carry forward the felt sense in many ways. That means that our story about carrying forward will have to be carried forward in many ways.

We need an alternative model to break the one that we're used to. To put an alternative model into the world this time should not mean "okay, this is now the model". This time we want to say "this is an alternative just so you can crack the usual way". You all know that - if you have only one point of view, you don't know that you only have one point of view. The moment you have two you have everything, because it breaks the assumption that you have only one.

Again I don't mean it negatively and post-modernly - if I did, you would still be stuck and have nothing. I don't mean "use the alternative only to break the old one" and have nothing. I'm assuming that one can use my alternative for a long time. After a while somebody will do it better, there will be a better alternative, and another one better. (I promised the second half wouldn't be so difficult!...)

You can have not just one or three. You can use every single experience and make a model out of it. You can just make one concept out of it, then it looks very modest. You can derive a whole model for everything from one little concept. So you can do it modestly - "I just want a concept for this funny thing that happens when I do this and this in therapy" or whatever. Or you can stretch it to become a whole model. Once you see this you become free, from the stuck also.

How could it have been so strange and so poor that people assumed you could have truth only in one form? We thought there should only be one truth. We thought that truth is some kind of formulation. The truth is not a formulation. Plato already knew that - the truth is some kind of relationship between what we have to live and what we say. But it's not so simple. The experiencing happens in a world, in a culture, and it already has all kinds of concepts in it. The experiencing is historical, the world didn't start with you at birth. All experiencing happens in some context, with other people.

That old philosopher would say that Gendlin is always talking about methods and concepts, and you have to start with the world. Of course he's right, because if you start with concepts and experiencing, the experiencing is not the beginning, the experiencing happens in a world, and experiencing always has concepts in it already. You don't know what they are, they're Greek or something, but they're there already because they structured the world. He's right. I'm also right, because how can he say those things? He's going to sit here and tell you about the world and history. History is just a story, his story! (It was an example of philosophy again!...)

The current, post-modern understanding, is stuck. It's stuck on the point that the old concepts are already there always, before one thinks, they're already in the experience. That should shake you all a little bit! We're used to rely on the felt sense, as if that were original. "You don't have to know how to deal with concepts", we think. It's not true, the concepts are already there. The concepts are implicit, they have already structured the world in which you live.

The answer that I'm giving is that the concepts are already implicit. The concepts do not surround, do not encompass the experience. That's the false assumption: that if you were born into this culture you can't experience anything that doesn't fit this culture. The assumption is that you are a product of the culture, you can produce nothing that doesn't come from the culture. This is false. (You need to ask yourself what "false" means!...)

A felt sense & experiencing come from much deeper layers than the culture. If you understand that you'll see that culture is very superficial. If I have a German janitor I know everything's going to work smoothly, and if I have one from Serbia, I know it's not going to. In America we have a whole string always of some nationality - one comes & becomes either a janitor or a restaurant man or a laundry man and brings the others from that country and trains them all - so then we have a whole lot of Greek restaurants and lots of Serbian janitors in Chicago.

Whether I want a German friend or a Serbian friend has no meaning at all, culture can't tell me anything there. Culture has become for me not only superficial but enjoyably funny - it's like when you love somebody you get to know them and you can predict their particular peculiarities. You smile at those things not because they're good or they're bad but because they're that person. You get to smile and say "oh yeah, in that culture one does these superficial things that way and it's lovely and it's not that it's good or that it's bad, it's just that, well, they do it that way" - but it's all superficial, external. The inner person is not a product of culture.

If you go into the felt sense, all the issues that are discussed in philosophy and in psychological theory look helpless because they are so general. The concepts you use are so general that they're helpless in comparison to the specificity and complexity of the felt sense. It's nowhere, the discussion in terms of the current concepts. They are so general that they don't reach into there.

For example, we have all these theories about the 'self'. I made myself a list of a few things about the 'self'. I wrote "I have a right to a self from out of the life content". It's an ironic sentence. The self is supposed to be some kind of unity, my identity. I never found the self like that. "I should have the right to a self", "I ought to be entitled to a self" - something like that. Not just any old self, but a self out of my life content. It's more intricate than the concepts that we have. There is such a thing as a self, only it's something that I don't have but I have a right to.

It's a little subtle the way that turns there. The word 'right' is also important and funny. Every creature I think has certain rights. What 'right' means is not that you're going to get it, just that you have a right to it.

We all know that there are sub-selves or part-selves, the inner child, other parts. If you don't know that, you're a multiple personality, you don't know it yet. There is a pathology of it. The pathology consists in that the different parts are not allowed to know about each other. And more than that, when it heals the person gets stronger.

It turns out that the person is still another one. The person is somebody that's continuous from the bottom up, speaks through from the bottom up. It was an important day for me when my client was speaking from a certain part of her as usual, and suddenly she was here too. So, what's a self? Now a client says to me "this is how I've changed - when I'm doing something, I'm doing it".

That was all supposed to be about 'the self'. It was only a few specifics to say that if you enter into a felt sense you can very quickly get rid of the old concepts. Let's make new ones. Not that we should go without concepts - that's stupid! If you think you're going without concepts it only means you're letting the old concepts rule everything.