4A. Some Philosophical Reflections
On Personal Identity *versus* Interpersonal Interaction

The Pursuit of Philosophy as a Discipline

Volume III

The Prescience of Philosophy as a Discipline:

Beyond Criticism:

How Should Philosophy
Progressively Perfect an Ongoing Critique of its Discipline,
And,
Through Such Constructive Insight,
Perceptively Appreciate the Nature of the Human Condition??
A Critique of Theory *versus* A Theory of Critique:

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Some Philosophical Reflections
On Personal Identity *versus* Interpersonal Interaction*

Life is lived chaotically, whether we are insightfully aware of this type of philosophical positioning or not. We are ever on an edge, where despite the greatest sense and semblance of self-will and self-control, forces that are beyond our control will intervene in the course of our passage through this world of life upon whose path we must walk together. However, meeting these points of bifurcation an element of choice can present itself where, through the collective wisdom of our life's journey, we might just head in the better direction, usually, more often than not, when we attempt to work with others rather than against them… (0)

In the ramblings of this short monologue I would like you to meet people in six situations through my eyes; through whose pivotal interactions the course of my existence was to take a more responsible direction. (1)

Most of my working life was spent as a psychiatric nurse. In the first three short encounters you will meet both patients and staff. In the hospital I worked in, like many workplaces in general, regardless of the discipline or vocation involved, they have become more and more bureaucratic in the way they operate – an unrelenting proliferation of forms later to be duplicated, in parallel, with computers; an expectation that nursing documentation record ever more information that all too often had little relevance to nursing care, a formalization of ongoing education that would shift online in an one-size fits all form that often seemed either inappropriate or just not relevant (like, e.g., an e-course on giving injections where human delivered instruction would have been a much quicker and safer route to have spent such time, rather than hovering over a computer and ticking all the boxes in the middle of work itself. To my mind, all this peripheral paper work and wasted computer time I would like to think of as 'meta-work', and, where over the years, sadly, this meta-work would increasingly stop me from doing my 'real work' which was 'to look after the patients, and, be ever ready to respond when and where I was needed'. (2)

One of the formal expectations of the hospital hierarchy was that you spend some time mentoring less experienced staff and in the process earn points to demonstrate your… maybe, your 'desire to earn points', appear keen enough to receive forms of promotion which did not really exist, for someone like myself. Very few positions were ever offered and they would inevitably entail even more bureaucratic procedures along with a host of additional worries; from balancing budgets to overseeing the writing and continual updating of hospital policies, before I even get to mention endless committees… (3)

* For latest version of this essay: www.homestead.com/noelshomepage/noelshomepage5.html

The best mentoring I ever received in a hospital was always spontaneously offered, there, on the very spot, when and where needed, from the wisdom of those who had truly been there so to speak… (4)

Very early on in my hospital training, very much as an apprentice learning on the job, I was placed in the 'lion's den', the lock up for the very violent patients and those directed from the courts for a wide variety of reasons. All of us herded together in a rather small dayroom, with a non-descript outside area used when the weather was not too inclement. The dayroom had a tv at one end and a very professional billiard table on the other side and where these implements of the game were all too often used to settle disputes both real and imagined.[1] (5)

A much older nurse came up to me and we got chatting. He quietly told me that William over there, not his real name, watching the tv, was one of the most dangerous patients in this room. His diagnosis, among other things, was that he was extremely paranoid. He had a habit of engaging you in conversation and then, thinking that he recognized you, thought you were going out with his sister, and, no doubt, you were a person who would be sexually abusing her… and, deserved to be corrected accordingly. But not to worry, this guy was very keen on cricket and all you have to do was engage him on that topic and this fit, young man will think yourself to be a great guy and, then, would happily leave you alone. (6)

Some hours later, William comes across and starts chatting. Very quickly he thinks he has recognized me from the past and, sure enough, that I was dating his sister… His eyes were like darting daggers, he was becoming more, and more agitated by the second… and, discovering skills I did not know I possessed, denied that we had ever met. No, I didn't know his sister. I immediately then asked him if he knew the latest cricket scores between New Zealand and Australia, hoping that they had been broadcast over the tv or by radio. I had to do cricket at school and chose that game because, I reasoned, I would be sitting on the sidelines for half of the game. Unfortunately, my side almost always was quickly put out of their misery and, consequently, had to endlessly field for most that time. Needless to say, my recent knowledge of this game at a national level was non-existent. But, true to form, he thought I must be a good bloke and I never ever encountered him, again, in the manner that we first met. (7)

What did I learn? Well, I was on a very steep learning curve. I discerned that we must not reflect what the other person is transmitting. That this intense moment of communication was operating on two levels simultaneously, namely, a cognitive level and a very emotional, affective level. The best communication in this situation needed an alignment between both. I had to get him to think and especially feel that what I was saying was true, both cognitively and emotionally. In the intensity of this moment, I got to also feel that he eventually felt that this was the case. In this period of confrontation, I had to desynchronize and decouple his fearfulness of both who he thought I might be and how he must react, and, synchronize all those signs and echoes that reinforced an affec-

[1] One more veritable Occupational Health and Safety issue that would not, thankfully, be countenanced in this day and age.

tive alignment between both of us that would put us on to the same 'wavelength'; that, through such ongoing resolution, would find us living and being as if 'together' in this same world... (8)

What else did I learn? That the best mentoring is also a sharing of local knowledge that could never ever enter a textbook. But, from that type of knowledge, we find solid grounds to extend our understandings of both this world and the diversity of people and events to be found therein. Moreover, under such divergent circumstances, we will also develop a wider range of responses, hopefully, those that will be more in tune with the existential specificity to be discerned in the uniqueness of those encounters. (9)

The next encounter I am about to relate was also had in this same security wing of the first hospital I worked in. Again, another staff member warned me about a certain patient who I shall name as Greg. This young fellow was in the habit of dramatically faking suicide and one of his *modus operandi*s was to threaten to throw himself in a river, and, therein and thereby, drown himself. I was told to just ignore him and restart your rambles across the countryside… and he will soon rejoin you once there was no longer an audience. I am sure this history was embedded in his voluminous nursing notes, but, this was a history unbeknownst to me. On fine days, a staff member would often take a small group of patients for a walk across the countryside and one of the spots we would often visit was not too far away… walking down a gravel road and crossing the bridge to a nice spot beside the water to sit on the grass and chat under the shade of the willow trees. As my luck would have it, Greg was in this walking party. After resting for about ten minutes or so, this young guy stripped his clothes off and, true to form, was dramatically threatening to jump into the river which was quite deep under the bridge. Well, pre-armed with this anticipated plan of action, I loudly told everyone that we were now moving on and we continued along this roadway. Of course, all the time, I was wondering if Greg had thrown himself into this river? But, true to form, he came running up the road, half-dressed, keen not be counted as someone who would have been treated as having gone AWOL. (10)

This is mentoring at its best. Neither textbooks nor hospital policies nor formal instruction will capture the essence of how to appositely respond in the specificity of such circumstances. (11)

In this regard, even patients can be mentors. Indeed, one brilliant picker of locks was going to teach me his craft but, unfortunately, he was sent back to jail after a short psychiatric assessment, so this potential career opportunity for me never materialized. To this day, I can never look at a Yale lock and confidently trust it. (12)

Again, in this same ward, one young patient took pity on me. Probably no more than a few years younger than myself. Let me refer to him as Charles. Charles asked me if I knew any holds, and, in answering "no", then and there, decided to teach me some. He must have been a great teacher because some weeks later when walking across the countryside with some patients, again in charge by myself, one young thug decided to trip

me up. I instantly put him in a hold to the surprise of everyone, including myself.[2] Firmly held in this hold, I immediately started marching him back to the ward, but, knew my fellow ramblers, including myself, were not too happy that this period away from the confinement of the ward was going to be cut short. So, after a few minutes I insisted he apologize and promise to behave himself. Happily, he did so, and that was the end of his stepping out of line. (13)

Philosophy is a passion of mine. In my first year at university I was doing science subjects, but, was always reading books in the sections of the library dealing with philosophy or religious studies. I had long recognized that I enjoyed reading science, albeit from a philosophical perspective, but, that I had no desire to be a scientist. The next year, I decided to do a hospital-based course in nursing that would take three years. At the end of that, resumed university studies by correspondence, and, in the following year, returned to university; but this time reading in those subjects that I had already spent years reading. I also enjoyed writing on philosophical themes and one of my lecturers invited me to read from my current book, which was on the topic of epistemology. This happened every Friday morning for an hour or two just before lunch. Over the years, I have been fortunate to have had a small number of academics take an interest in the gestation of my ideas. This person was a very open-minded Protestant minister[3] and I would like to relate one very specially remembered incident. I would need to rephrase an ancient saying by noting "we shall know them by their libraries" as this academic had books in every room. This day, we were in his basement, which had shelves of books. I was discussing my latest section on aesthetic reception and proposed what might be called a rather snobbish view of aesthetic appreciation, namely, as aesthetic discrimination took mental concentration and serious reflection that only those people who possess such refinements could truly appreciate the aesthetic dimension in experience. He asked me to wait a few minutes. Went into the midst of his shelving, looking for a specific book. After a few minutes, having found what he was looking for, he came back to his chair and handed me a book on the travel adventures of some rather eccentric English explorers who had taken an old Edison-style gramophone with them up the Amazon river. The book was opened at a photograph taken on this expedition. There seated on the ground, was an almost naked Amazonian native beside such an instrument with his eyes shut, his mouth open and head thrown back in what looked like a state of sheer ecstasy. Well, so much for theory. The photo was titled something along the lines… listening to the Great G minor symphony by Mozart. But, I soon rose to the occasion by proposing a qualifying theory of transcendental access by arguing that where in the psyche the aesthetic resolution was created and centered was important as to how accessible that form of aesthetic expression would be received. So, the wonderful counter rhythms of Mozart were something, obviously, that this indigenous person could truly appreciate, whereas, I am sure, the convoluted, microtesimal meanderings in a work of lieder, say, by Hugo Wolf, might take a little longer to better appreciate and more deeply enjoy. (14)

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[2] One nurse walking, by themselves, with a half dozen patients with that type of history, is another veritable Occupational Health and Safety issue that would not, thankfully, be countenanced in this day and age.

[3] The Reverent Henry (Harry) Thornton.

Now, back to this hospital I first worked in. I was having a leisurely afternoon tea with the nursing staff when this woman, who I had never met before, launched into a diatribe and subjected myself to a withering critique. Now, I know I am not perfect, but, didn't think I was quite that bad. For once in my life, I literally bit my tongue and bided my time, saying very little. Shocked, I had no desire to describe how insulting and rude she was and must have looked very uncomfortable having to weather such a tirade. However, a few days later this same woman apologized, and thanked me for taking things so calmly. We became good friends. I was soon to find out from the local grapevine that her husband had just run off with a younger model, another nurse. That, I suspect, I did look a little like her errant husband and was a convenient target for this form of transference. During another afternoon tea, I was describing how my accommodation in the nurses home was a bit like entering 'the valley of death' what with stereos thundering to the left and right of me, above me and below me… and this women told me about a place that was coming up for rent in the countryside, above the cliffs as Seacliff, with a lovely view of the entrance to the Otago Harbour in the distance.[4] On enquiring, found out that the rent was all of $1.50 per week, or about $72 a year. Under the roof of this two-bedroom cottage I was to live for five and half years. I have fond memories of this first home of mine… and ever grateful that I was able to suspend my pride… and not take everything at face value… (15)

Having been mentored on many occasions, when a friend asked me to write a paper on the topic of Yogacara Buddhist Philosophy and present it to a group of Chinese students, I felt that this was a task I could suitably expedite. Unfortunately, although asked to read this paper, the occasion never eventuated. I did seek to discharge this mission with much attention to both detail and some succinctness. Relying on my hard-won knowledge of the Sanskrit language, I translated a key passage in a central text in order to demonstrate how such a philosophy should not be misconstrued as some form of unadulterated idealism. But not all was lost. This paper of mine, on the Academia web-page, has been my most 'sighted' paper; having been 'seen' by at least ninety-nine viewers when I last looked.[5] On the strength of this paper, I have been invited to attend a number of virtual seminars which has given me a great degree of intellectual pleasure being able to tune into some of the latest ideas being circulated in that field. (16)

In this surprising world, there are many twists and turns, many ups and downs. I am ever grateful to the wonderful people I have met along the way who, for all the chaos of worldly existence, can sometimes make our path a little smoother, maybe not immediately, but, certainly, over the unravelling of time…. (17)

Noël Tointon, Wentworth Falls, 9.11.20.

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[4] Where I worked one Xmas break, a few years earlier, as a relieving lighthouse keeper.

[5] 'Sighted' and not 'cited'. I am not aware of having been formally cited although have a small number of people 'following me'.