

What Drove Me to Philosophy

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Aristotle tells us that the impulse, which drives us to philosophize, is “thaumazein,” wonder at the world. In a way this is right. The most important philosophical moments are when something you have always taken for granted, barely even noticed, strikes you as remarkable, even astonishing. So philosophers can ask questions like: “Why is there something instead of nothing?” or “What is this ‘I’, which accompanies everything I meet?”

But there is another side to this wonder, and that is puzzlement. Once you are led to ask questions like these, you don't know how to go on. How should you formulate these questions? How to seek for an answer? This puzzlement can be painful, as much as the wonder is exhilarating; and both together drive you to try to formulate, articulate, deep issues of which you were unaware, issues you didn't know existed in the past and which others may find weird.

I'd like to talk today of how wonder and puzzlement intruded into my life, and how they pushed me where I have gone. It started when I was very small. I remember a sense of longing for a place full of marvels. But this place was paradoxical. It seemed to be situated in a certain direction outside of the garden where I lived and played; and yet I was aware that it wasn't really situated in ordinary space——though I could never have articulated this at the time. But already I was being nudged towards philosophy, which is all about articulating what has never been properly said. I am aware of course that it is not only philosophy which tries to do this; poetry, music, art can all struggle with the same deep intuitions. But philosophy has its own medium, and I was already being propelled towards it.

Later in adolescence I began to have a sense of this higher place as linked with God, and with a possible transformation of human beings. But the initial moment remained a determining one for me. How to understand human beings and human life, in a way, which can show what this sense of a “higher place” comes from, and what it means?

At first, I studied history. This seemed to be the best way. Then I became

involved in politics; in the ways that politics could transform human life. But underlying all these was an interest in philosophical anthropology: what were human beings, these beings who can speak and therefore articulate, and in this way transform themselves?

In contact with both history and politics as academic subjects, I began to see how often they are studied in a way, which shuts out the questions I was asking. Often one supposes a stripped—down, reductive view of human life. A great deal of my work has been an attempt to combat this kind of reductive, over—simple, one—dimensional understanding. Another impetus was a more immediate practical one: how to articulate the political issues of our time, so that we can actually make headway. And behind both of these was the original search, for that paradoxical place beyond space, for a possible higher mode of being.

From this beginning point I will try to make sense of the questions I have taken up, of my understanding of philosophy as not “pure,” but involving a knowledge (in my case) of society and history. I will talk of the discouragements, and then sometimes breakthroughs, which are inseparable from any life of the “philosophical” kind, which it can be seen is lived by lots of thinkers who are not philosophers in the narrow, academic sense.

I

First, there was my encounter with the stripped—down, reductive understanding of human life. I started my academic life as a student of history, as I have just said. After my first degree at McGill, I won a Rhodes Scholarship, which took me to Oxford, where I stepped laterally, as it were, and took another undergraduate degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. I was already very interested and involved in politics, and I saw my studies then as a preparation for a life where political action would dominate. I mean that in the broadest sense, not just party political activity. Up to a few months before my final examinations, I was discussing taking up a post in an international NGO. Suddenly, rather abruptly, my plans changed, and I determined to continue for a doctoral degree at Oxford.

What happened? My first real encounter with academic philosophy was at Oxford; and I was appalled with what I saw as a dry, positivistic style, which seemed to devalue and dismiss the deepest, most important questions of life. What is more, I became

aware of how a similar spirit was dominant in the sciences of human life, in psychology and political science for instance. Further study in this climate seemed to offer only frustration and discouragement. So why did I go on? Here is where the dynamic force of perplexity took over. I just couldn't make my peace with the idea of philosophy so drained of human import, and with a picture of human life so narrow and reductive. I had to discover and in some way vindicate in argument a more satisfactory way of thinking. I found the guiding thread for this in the work of Merleau—Ponty.

I want to stress that I am speaking autobiographically. My reactions at the time did not do full justice to philosophy at Oxford. Later I discovered people and arguments there, which were very useful to me. But in 1955, it was the negative reaction, which prevailed. And so I began to work on a doctoral dissertation, inspired by Merleau—Ponty, which became eventually a critique of psychological behaviourism (later published as *The Explanation of Behaviour*).

What this choice of subject made clear is that what mattered to me was what one could call “philosophical anthropology,” that is, a philosophical account of human nature or the human condition. This would ideally reflect the wonder at the greatness but at the same time strangeness of human life——in the words of Pascal, one can speak of “grandeur et misère.” And it would ideally reduce the perplexity. But I have to admit that much of the latter is still there. I believe that I have argued against bad, reductive views of the human being, which have impeded the progress of knowledge about human affairs. But as to replacing these with a coherent view, which resolves the puzzles, which we all experience about our own existence, I have to confess that I have not advanced very far. The force of perplexity is still driving me on.

It is perhaps the case that humans will always find their own existence enigmatic. But the forms the enigma takes are different in different epochs. There is a form, which characterizes Western modernity, which emerges in issues like the “mind—body” problem, and in disputes around the validity of reductive explanations. This whole set of problems arises in the work of Descartes who following Galileo utterly dismisses the older teleological accounts of nature in terms of the forms, and insists that bodies are to be understood purely mechanistically. If this really applies to **all** bodies, including our own, then our experience of the lived body, which is very much one of purposes, struggling to realize themselves, must somehow be judged misleading. We are attributing something to

bodies, Descartes tells us, which properly belongs only to mind. This Cartesian idea, that our lived experience of ourselves is somehow misleading, that in fact the proper explanation of bodily existence must be mechanistic, survives the belief in Cartesian dualism. Modern materialism is often just Cartesian dualism with one term—the mental—lopped off. It is still in the business of offering a reductive account.

Of course, the materialist drive to reduction also takes other forms. We can see it in vulgar Marxism in the idea that “material” drives, for goods, for the means of production, for power over others, are what really determine the course of history, and that the “higher” aspirations are shaped by and rationalize these basic forces. But all these relate in one way or another to the tremendous prestige of post—Galilean natural science, which constantly from Hobbes on inspires the ambition to explain human life in the same basic undeniable terms that figure in our physics and mechanics.

Of course, many of these “materialist” explanations have been discredited. We don't find many people today who would offer historical explanations, which simply accept the primacy of economic factors, for instance. But the underlying thrust is still there, which generates the simple chain of reasoning: we are bodily beings; but bodies are best understood “mechanistically,” that is, in terms which eschew all mention of teleology and consciousness; THEREFORE, we are best understood mechanistically. This conclusion can seem to emerge from a syllogism whose premises are undeniable. Of course, this syllogism contains a crucial equivocation, which invalidates it logically, but we can see nevertheless that it can formulate a psychologically powerful intuition. So maybe certain reductive explanations don't work? Maybe they are too simple? Nevertheless, when we eventually get down to explaining human action in terms of neurobiology, THEN the material basis of all action will become clear. That is a hope.

But whatever one's hunches about how things will turn out, it is clear that as long as the whole issue of how our thought and action is realized in neurobiology remains enigmatic and unclear, this puzzlement about ourselves, characteristic of post—Cartesian thought, will remain unresolved. I will come back later to this, in talking about my own present agenda, the direction in which my own puzzlement is driving me.

But for the moment, I want to say something further about puzzlement as a driving force. You can see that it was a decisive factor in my life, back in 1955. It changed

my direction. I could just have said: so philosophy as practised in the contemporary university is not very useful. I know there are other thinkers, who are more valuable, whom I have found interesting. So I can get on with my active life, and leave philosophy departments to sort things out. I could just have stepped out of the field. But somehow it was unbearable to leave it just there, not to be able to work out for myself what was wrong with what I had been taught, not to work through the problem and see how it could be resolved. But that doesn't fully explain the course I took. The fact that perplexity is close to unbearable can be a motive for just forgetting about the whole matter. And this can be particularly attractive when the alternative is directing one's attention and effort towards something else, which is indubitably worthwhile. And precisely such an alternative beckoned for me in 1955. The NGO I would have joined was engaged in organizing international aid for students and university, raising funds in the developed world for universities in developing countries. In fact, many of my colleagues—to—be in the NGO world found my decision hard to understand.

And in fact, it wasn't such a clear—cut decision. A year later, after the Hungarian Revolution in November 1956, I found myself taking a unilateral “leave of absence” from my studies to help organize a Field Office in Vienna which sought to house and find transport and scholarships for Hungarian student refugees. In fact, my choice between the scholarly and active lives was never total; I have always tried to run them in some degree together. Nevertheless, my decision in 1955 meant that I would have a continuous university career, however distracted by other concerns.

Now, return to perplexity. Its intensity can either make you flee, or force you to immerse yourself in it. If it pushes you to engage, then you can find that the degree of puzzlement is proportional to the gain you can achieve. We fall into deep perplexity precisely because our whole way of seeing the matter in question is inadequate, even distorted. We dimly sense this, and hence comes the puzzlement. This can drive us to the point where we begin to see what is wrong, where a wholly new way of understanding the issue comes to light. It's almost as though we had finally taken a pair of distorting glasses off our nose. The rewards for immersing oneself in perplexity can be very great, even if there are moments along the way when you feel defeated and wish you could forget the whole thing. One could almost formulate a maxim for people entering into philosophy: throw yourself into the very heart of what you find puzzling. But I don't want to proffer this

advice myself, because I know how much it is a matter for each person, leading their own life, to respond in their own way to the puzzlements they face, either turning away or engaging.

I have just used the word “philosophy.” But it is probably clear that I mean that in the widest possible sense. For me the core issues have been those of philosophical anthropology. It was very obvious to me from the beginning that one can't engage seriously with these if one remains within the ambit of academic philosophy, as this is defined by and in philosophy departments, at least those in the English—speaking world. One always needs a sort of hybrid training, taking much from philosophy in the narrow sense, but also much from the field concerned. In this I followed the example of Merleau—Ponty, which has remained paradigmatic for me. My dissertation on behaviourist psychology drew on what we can learn from Aristotle and the philosophy of science to define the issues, but also entailed reading a great deal of the behaviourist literature. After I left Oxford and returned to Montreal in 1961, I entered a political science department and taught political theory. In the end this helped prepare me to develop critiques of contemporary social science. In this whole range of work, involved with philosophical anthropology, the background one needs is hybrid. I say “hybrid,” to situate myself in relation to the existing academic boundaries between departments. But maybe one should just ignore these. Maybe one should say that there is no clear boundary between, say, philosophy and social science or history. A study is philosophical to the extent that it takes a stand on certain fundamental issues in anthropology, and social—scientific to the extent that it gathers and tries to explain data about society and history. The great founding figures of social science in the West, like Marx, Durkheim and Weber were at once philosophers, historians, sociologists (in Marx's case, also an economist). The best work goes in “hot pursuit” of its problems in blissful ignorance of departmental boundaries.

II

I have been dealing with one dimension or path of perplexity, which has been driving me on over the decades. But as I said above, another continuing concern has been politics, in the broadest sense, and political involvement. If you engage in active politics, in

partisan politics in your society, then you are forced to face and try to resolve certain policy issues. Some of the things you have been thinking about in a “theoretical” mode relate to the issues you have to help resolve practically. Can you make a contribution as an intellectual to the political process of resolving these burning issues? One would like to think so, and often one's colleagues in the party one has joined expect this of you. What is the good of studying society and history if you can't help us answer these burning questions?

I have to say that facing this kind of demand is a humbling experience. What you develop in your scholarly accounts of various societies at various times may be hard to apply to the particular context of action, which you find yourself in, like it or not. You can easily find that the knowledge about some other society is not that easily applicable; or even that your whole theory leaves out some crucial factors; or that there are other features of your situation that clamour for attention; and so on.

Moreover, there are subtle dangers, which attend the action of a public intellectual. One is, that it is all too easy to overlook the limitations I have just described, and to try to convince people by impressing them with your scholarly credentials. One distorts as it were, the process of political deliberation by offering a too confident input based on scholarly work. But there is also a danger in the other direction, that your political commitment can weigh too heavily on your scholarly work, and lead you to conclusions, which are not really justified by the reality studied.

These provide two good reasons for intellectuals and academics not to get involved in politics. But I was not able to stay away, and so I have tried to avoid these two pitfalls as well as I can. If one does get involved in this spirit, there are tremendous potential gains for an intellectual. This is because the experience of political engagement offers one insight into the process, which one could only get by many years of study, if one ever got it at all. In my life, the experience of political campaigns, when I ran for Parliament, gave me an understanding of the thinking and reactions of citizens in my society, which can't be substituted for by any number of poll results that one might read. I would say that the direct experience of exchange with citizens, at meetings and on the doorstep, gives one a sense of the mental and emotional context from which these poll results emerge. When you're told after this direct experience, for example, that 35% of the population agrees strongly with some sentences, you have some better sense of the

mindsets that generated this answer. And I experienced the same kind of gain in my recent involvement with the Quebec Commission on the practices of reasonable accommodation of cultural/religious differences.

This latter commission was in an area where scholarly work and politics have had to come together. I am speaking of the entire vexed question of what is often called in the West “multi—culturalism.” I mean by this the complex of issues concerning how we deal with the growing diversity in our societies. Here is where experience, both in politics and in our lives, can make a big difference to one's scholarly work.

There are two important intuitions that are essential to good policy in this area, moves one might say, through much perplexity to a new framework. One is to see that the normative questions of multiculturalism aren't just simple issues of distributive justice. These are very relevant, but just as important are the issues of how to create a common understanding of democratic citizenship, which really includes everyone. And this is not just a question of justice, but also of how to foster mutual trust and a sense of common political identity. The second intuition almost follows from the first. It is to see that the solutions to the problems of multiculturalism can differ very much from society to society, just because the historic conditions of trust and identity—formation have been so different.

Now it helps to see these points early in one's deliberations if you already live in a society which is dual, that is, if your society already contains two such different contexts. This is our situation in Canada, which has for more than two centuries been struggling to integrate two national societies. This is one of the reasons that various Canadian authors from the beginning have made internationally recognized contributions to the debate. I am thinking here principally of my colleague Will Kymlicka.

If I can take another autobiographical turn, my acute awareness of the Canadian duality comes from my family background. I come from a family where the two languages and societies met; my father being Anglophone from Ontario and my mother French—speaking from Quebec. Moreover, I was growing up through a period of high tension between the two groups, during the Second World War, while the conscription crisis was at its height. This brought indelibly home to me how two languages can reflect the world very differently, so that people can talk past each other for decades and generations.

This understanding of the necessary plurality of solutions in this domain was

strengthened and extended when thinkers in Canada were invited abroad to discuss these questions in the US and Europe. Because we had developed a body of theory about multiculturalism, people often thought we might be able to propose “solutions,” or else they assumed from the fact that our solutions didn't fit their case that the whole enterprise of devising a multicultural policy was mistaken. But the more we examined these other societies, the more it became clear that solutions couldn't just be exported. This is not to say that one doesn't gain a great deal from the comparison. Certain features of one society only emerge when you compare it with others. But what emerges from all this is a lively sense of the contrasts between different contexts.

It is very clear to me how this concern with diversity and with the harmonious co—existence of different groups emerges out of my experience, both political and personal. I have spoken about this concern in relation to multicultural policy, but it has been something much more widely intertwined with my whole intellectual career. I have enthusiastically defended the idea of “multiple modernities.” This is the thesis that what we call rather simply the onset of “modernity” is not a process, which is destined to repeat itself identically in different societies and cultures, some earlier and others later. There are common features, as also borrowings and imposed changes, which pass from some societies to others. But the actual cultures of successful modernization can be and often are very different. The common process can indeed be characterized by certain institutional features: modern societies develop industrial economies, aiming at growth, states on the Westphalian model, endowed with bureaucracies; they see an erosion of older kinship solidarities in favour of new forms of citizenship, and so on for a series of linked changes. But the cultural developments which are essential to sustain these changes are not necessarily the same: their understanding of individuality, and family life, and social solidarity, as well as of the place of “religion,” which in turn means something very different in different cultures.

This intuition of multiplicity is another one of those breakthroughs in which after much perplexity one liberates oneself from a distorting framework. The notion of modernity as a single uniform process, which all societies are destined to go through, some earlier and some later, is part of a deeply implanted picture in modern western consciousness. It is part of what was for a long time the dominant master narrative of Western modernity. One can see this forming in the 18th Century, articulated by thinkers

like Ferguson and Adam Smith: the human race goes through a number of stages, defined by the manner in which humans make their living: hunter—gatherers give way to nomads who in turn are succeeded and overwhelmed by agricultural societies. These last are finally succeeded by “commercial” societies. To this story, later centuries have added further stages: industrial, “postindustrial,” “electronic.” The basic idea is of a chain of irreversible transformations, where a more developed economy brings with it a more civilized and law—abiding order. The cultural changes inevitably go along with the social and economic ones, partly as conditions of progress, partly as consequences.

The universal relevance of this chain of stages was easy to believe for Westerners as long as colonial empires dominated the non—Western world. Already in the 19th Century Japan shattered this picture, but it was possible to ignore this as long as the Empires were more or less intact. The last half—century has seen their disintegration, and it is now easier to think beyond this understanding of “modernity.” But the power of these narratives is such that they easily outlive the conditions, which made them superficially plausible. One of the features of the great Master Narrative of Western modernity, which survived up until yesterday, was the secularization thesis, the notion that “modernity” inevitably brings along with it a decline in religion, both in its social relevance, and in the lives of individuals. It was widely expected that the developments we see in European societies in this regard would be more or less identically repeated in other parts of the world. Only recently has this notion been widely and deeply shaken.

This issue of the narratives we tell ourselves in order to understand ourselves has been another central axis of my work, along with that of philosophical anthropology, which I described above. In other words, it is a domain in which I have been struggling through various stages of perplexity to develop a more adequate——or to put it negatively——a less distorting narrative. My fundamental idea here is that it is too early even to think of matching the supposedly universal narratives of “modernization.” What I could contribute were narratives of Western history which leave room for, and call for completing by, the histories of other civilizations as they develop their own modernity. *Sources of the Self* was one such story of Western understandings of identity. And recently I have completed another such work. In *A Secular Age*, I criticize the Grand Narrative of Secularization, even as applied to the West. Western societies are much more diverse than was supposed, and the site of crosscurrents undreamt of by mainstream secularization theory. Once one sees

this, the last temptation to project the theory globally disappears.

It is clear that, just like with philosophical anthropology, much perplexity remains after the earlier simple narratives are sidelined. But as with philosophical anthropology, I feel that important progress has been made in recent decades. At least certain simple blunders can be confidently left behind. I am very happy to have made a small contribution to these developments.

III

Philosophical anthropology; and then the issues of diversity which ultimately led me to challenge the too unified Western narratives of modernity; these are two of the dimensions or axes of my work. But there is a third, which crosses both of these. This goes back to the original puzzlement, the Ur—perplexity of my life, which centred originally around a paradoxical place out of space, but which could perhaps be identified as the place of the spiritual in human life. *A Secular Age* was also operating on this axis. I was not just concerned to upset a too facile narrative of secularization; I also wanted to find a language to describe the conditions of spiritual life today in Western societies; that is, to attempt a portrait of the obstacles and invitations to religious belief and spiritual commitment in our world. This has been something I have been trying to understand since the beginning; the narration of the transformations of religious life in Latin Christendom gave me a language to talk about this, I hope fruitfully. I focused principally on the obstacles, because as a person of faith, I find these harder to understand; and respect here goes along with understanding.

I believe that we could hold a fruitful dialogue among people of different faiths and those who see themselves as rejecting all faiths, if only we could get beyond the urge to caricature those who have a very different faith position. I believe also that we urgently need to do this, not only because something important about the human condition is disclosed from every such position, believing or not, but also because the most sterile and destructive disputes arise around such profound differences of conviction. My book was partly an attempt to prepare myself for this kind of conversation, wherever it turns out to be possible.

In addition, examining the place of the spiritual in human life makes one more

acutely aware of the demonic potentiality, which lies very close to it. One becomes aware, in other words, of how easily our reaching for the religious or the spiritual can be abused, and turned towards appalling hatred and destruction. The fact of such hatred is obvious; we see it every day on television. But we need to understand better how this terrible deviation arises. Some atheists duck this difficult task by the essentialist claim that religion of itself leads to violence. Some believers try a similar evasion by blaming certain other religions for this. This essentialism flies in the face of the fact that large—scale violence has been done in the name of all religions, and also of atheist ideologies, like Marxism or Fascism. Religious violence in our day has a lot in common with the violence inspired by nationalism. Indeed, the two often fuse. At the same time, it clearly has to do with our need to feel that we are pure and good by projecting all evil on to the other. We urgently need to understand all this better.

But in any case, switching again to the axis of philosophical anthropology, it should be clear that reductive accounts of violence, such as those proffered by sociobiology cannot really do the job. It is all too evident that certain “metaphysical” motivations, such as the search for meaning in life, or the aspiration to purity and innocence, for a cause to which one can dedicate oneself, play a crucial role in generating the murderous struggles that blight our world.

However, it is abundantly clear that on this third, spiritual axis, much remains that is enigmatic. Perhaps some steps forward have been made, but the perplexity is still there, in some ways as deep and thick as ever. And with the puzzlement, the motivation to go on. In philosophy, there is no such thing as a finished life work, unless in the banal sense that death stops everyone in their tracks.

As for me, I am drawn on, and in several directions. I will just mention a few here. First, the issues I have just outlined about the basis for religious, or ideological, or nationalist violence preoccupy me very much. Secondly, I want to return to an old project, about the nature of language and linguistic meaning.

Returning to the first axis and the enigma of human nature, we can see why this is crucial. One central form of reductive explanation of human life starts from the notion that everything could be explained in neurobiology. But this necessarily places the focus on individual organisms. Another central form starts from a reduced understanding of human

social motivation: we seek to meet our material needs, we seek power, we seek to neutralize our enemies. From this standpoint language is important because it allows us to think and calculate better, and it allows us to coordinate our action. But in face of this, it is clear that a) language is first of all a creation of society, of culture; no—one invents language on their own; those who are not inducted into language by others remain deprived of the crucial capacities we think of as human. And secondly, b) it is clear that language serves a whole range of purposes beyond reasoning, calculation and coordination. It has expressive functions, it bonds us; it allows us to narrate, to create poetry. How in the face of these two facts of language to make sense of the whole phenomenon? And what are the boundaries of the phenomenon? Does it only include what we call speech and derivatively writing? Or do we have to include music, mime, dance, painting, and sculpture? These are some of the questions I would like to answer, but the perplexity is still thick around them.

Thirdly, understanding language as social and expressive might help us to understand the evolution of humanity out of the early hominids. This is far beyond my present competence, but I am sure that important new conceptualizations are within reach in this area.

I have tried to show how my work emerges out of my life, by using this master notion of perplexity or puzzlement, and the way that this has drawn me irresistibly along certain axes. I wanted to make my philosophical life more transparent and understandable. I hope that I haven't ended up making myself seem more puzzling than before. In any case, I thank you very much for your attention, and I thank again the Inamori Foundation for this marvelous occasion to reflect on and make sense of my life as a philosopher.