The Spin of Plato in His Grave

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IT is no secret that philosophy, as a way of life rather than a subject to be taken in school, began and ended with Plato. Some few in every age, like Epictetus sitting on the curbstone, and Hoffer toting bales on the docks, have practiced philosophy as Socrates did, but the academicians know better. Philosophy is not just a subject to them, but a very hard subject indeed, and full of spiffy terms.

We had a letter from a reader, who sent us thanks for "slowing the spin of Plato in his grave", and we knew exactly what he meant. He, after all, was doing no less. In Plato, we see and hear people sitting around and talking. And, while their way of talking is not the same as that in which we reminisce and gossip, it was not all that special either. It was ordinary human talk called to order from time to time, and frequently sent off on long but essential detours so that a term might be thoughtfully defined, and a proposition tested. And it is, therefore, especially for those who imagine that efficiency is the same as effectiveness, long and slow. And so it was that Aquinas argued the need for divine revelation, while holding also that all Truth could be discovered by reason alone. No one lives long enough to finish the job, however, so God gives us hints. Socrates was not entirely in disagreement with that.

The talking of philosophy was also different in its matter, but not in any way foreign to ordinary human experience. We can distinguish it nicely by stealing an idea from C. S. Lewis. It is talking in which people pay attention to what they are doing, and not to what may happen. Therefore, contrary to popular opinion, it is not "speculative". Unlike the bull session, it is talking in which the talkers will agree, even if they have to be driven to agree, by the logic that is so often called "mere", that such mental acts as guessing, and wishing, and believing are not useful in a search for understanding. Speculation is for economists and sociologists, for religionists and reformers, for psychiatrists and politicians, and, strange as it may seem, for scientists.

After all, it is anything but speculative to say that he who wants to hire a horse-trainer

should judge a candidate for the job not by what he says of himself but by the behavior of the horses he has trained, any more than it is by guessing that we know that things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Nor is it speculation, but simply a clarifying of meaning, to say that a stingy man thinks the liberal man profligate, and the profligate man thinks him stingy. It is out of the dawning of knowledge, not out of speculation, that a man may come to wonder whether he *should* want what he wants. And it is out of just such ordinary knowables that the talking of philosophy in Plato is built. We can all do it.

And we all do do it, if only for a moment, if only now and then.

The practice of philosophy in Plato takes it for granted that there is no understanding of greater mysteries for those who will not pass through the lesser, a notion no more arcane than our own well-founded suspicion that the way to get to Carnegie Hall is by practicing. If we have generally abandoned philosophy as a guide to ordinary living, it is not only because of the proprietary claims of academics, but also because it seems to us that philosophy has failed. Just look! All these centuries of philosophy, and Earth is not yet fair, nor all men wise and good! But the "philosopher", as Plato understood the word, knows that if Earth is ever to be fair, he had better straighten up his yard; and that *all* men will never be wise and good until *he* is wise and good. He knows, therefore, which part of the Great Work of Making the Whole World a Better Place is for him to do. And that is enough to make a philosopher.

Well, maybe there is one more little thing, perhaps the least of the lesser mysteries, but one that fewer and fewer pass through these days. He has to be able to make sense in language.