
A Life in Philosophy in Several Stages

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In *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the moment comes late in the life of a philosopher when one can finally and frankly ask, “What is it that I have been doing all my life?”¹ This very basic question is one that many philosophers never raise as such; it has been obscured by a career in which “there has been too much desire to do philosophy”;² doing it by active engagement in writing and teaching, leaving no time to ask what one has been really doing all the while. This occasion, the John Dewey Lecture, invites me to ask myself what *have* I been doing with my time in philosophy? In other words, it allows me to catch up with myself—and to let you catch a glimpse of what I’ve been up to all these years.

I

I see my life in philosophy as having unfolded in three stages. The first was a period of privileged sequestration. In high school, I went to an all boys’ private school in Asheville, North Carolina, far from my home in Topeka, Kansas. The Dickensian loneliness of being at that school left a lot of time for reading, well beyond what was assigned for classes. Being on the honors list, I was allowed to go into the town of Asheville on Saturday afternoons—the one reprieve in a week of otherwise arduous class work—and on one of these expeditions I bought a copy of Santayana’s *Skepticism and Animal Faith*. At age sixteen, I devoured the book, fascinated by the way the flowing prose laid out what it is to know something and what the limits of knowing are; what a sensation is and how it differs from something imagined; and how we must trust our brute and primary perception of the world. It wasn’t so much Santayana’s arguments that intrigued me as the fact that someone of such evident intelligence could raise such probing questions—questions I had never

asked myself until then, but that instantly seemed to be exactly the *right* questions, those I should be asking myself if I had half a mind. *Half a mind*? That's all I felt I had, as a first-time reader of philosophy. (I still have this same sense when I read a difficult philosopher such as Badiou or Lyotard for the first time.) How to move to a place where I could raise searching questions as my own "probe-head"³ that day seemed far off indeed. But I had drunk the Kool-Aid that might someday get me to that point—which was to be many years later, in sober fact.

Before I could reach that moment, I had to learn much more about the field that was so inadvertently opened up in that downtown Asheville bookstore. The next step was undertaking an undergraduate major in philosophy at Yale, where Richard Bernstein was my most inspiring teacher. He instilled in his students a profound sense of "The Romance of Philosophy," the title of his own Dewey Lecture of 2006. Bernstein had a special genius for engaging members of his class in the most pressing questions: What is freedom? What are its limits? He engaged us in large part because he was so deeply engaged himself in these same questions. I had developed an interest in psychoanalysis, and he encouraged me to bring Freud into dialogue with Kant, leading me to write a senior thesis on "Freedom in Psychoanalysis." To what extent does psychopathology inhibit free will? Is there a residual freedom *under* the symptoms that may otherwise dominate everyday existence? Not surprisingly, these were really questions that I was posing to *myself* in the neurotic misery of that period of my life. My thesis was deeply flawed, but the effort introduced me to the rigors of working out my own ideas in the face of formidable thinkers. It also helped me to realize that there are no easy, much less definitive, answers to basic questions. I was introduced as well to the special challenge of asking such questions in the light of findings from other fields—in my case, psychoanalysis.

I had been drawn to psychoanalysis ever since my childhood in Topeka, a major center for psychiatry in that era. My father was the legal counsel for the Menninger Foundation, and I had worked there as a part-time art therapist. My sister's sudden psychotic breakdown in the summer before my sophomore year at Yale—devastating to my parents, deeply disorienting to me—led me to a precipitous decision to become pre-med, hoping I might become a psychiatrist who would understand mental illness better as well as helping those who were so afflicted. By senior year, I had to decide between this career path and teaching philosophy (along with two other choices: city planning and becoming an artist). In the spring of that year, just when I was finishing my essay on freedom (and very much reflecting the wide-open choices that lay

before me), I was at a confusing decision point and close to breakdown myself, not knowing which way to go.

Just before graduation, I heard that I had been awarded a Carnegie Teaching Fellowship for the next year. This was designed to deflect those heading for a standard profession such as medicine or law into a career of teaching. It offered a generous stipend for the time (\$3,500 to live on) and the opportunity to teach one class each semester as well as to attend graduate courses in one's home institution. This sudden windfall was for me the kairotic moment. By the following spring, there was no question but that I would pursue a career in philosophy: not because teaching was easy (it was exceedingly demanding, and it still is) or because writing philosophy was any easier. Rather, I just saw *no other way to go*. Visiting Professor Stefan Körner had told me when I encountered him in the Yale library and described my agonizing over what I should do in the future, "Don't go into philosophy *unless you feel you must do so*."

By the spring of 1962, I experienced just the sense of necessity Körner had singled out as the decisive criterion for making philosophy a career. From that moment on, I knew I had found my *métier*—not from any feeling of special talent or early success, but just because *I could do no other*. Much the same sense of necessity has served as a guidepost for me in later years. This works the other way around too. For example, even when I decided a decade later to undertake training at a psychoanalytic institute, it was clear to me that I would never practice as an analyst: it was not necessary to practice, since it became clear to me that it was the *theory* of unconscious mental process that drew me to undertake this training. This was confirmed by my interest in the writings of Jacques Lacan, whose seminar I had attended in the mid-1960s in Paris and whom I invited to Yale in 1975 for his only American expedition. Lacanian theory was scintillating and revolutionary in the world of psychoanalysis, but I experienced no personal need to become a Lacanian analyst. (At the time of the Yale lecture, Lacan was into a fascination with knots—"rope tricks" as he called them—as models of unconscious primary process, and he confounded the large audience who had come to hear his public lecture by first declaring that "I am here to tell you that Socrates was a male hysteric" and then proceeding to tie and untie knots with the help of an assistant. After forty-five minutes, most of the audience was gone, leaving Lacan on stage with his assistant, amidst a mounting pile of convoluted knots.)

Thus went the first phase of my life in philosophy. Looking back, I realize how sheltered a life this was—how much I benefited from the privilege

of being upper-middle class, from being white, and from being educated in a private high school and college in the midst of males only. Asheville and Yale, for all their educational merits, were perfect breeding grounds for the kind of obliviousness to being white and male that George Yancy singled out in his recent "Letter to White America." (Had I read such a letter at the time, I would have been uncomprehending; now I get it, and wonder why I failed for so long to understand what Yancy sets forth so movingly.)

In short, I took being white and male for granted as unmarked positions in a larger social nexus. Of course, so did many members of my generational cohort: the questions of gender and racial identity were rarely raised, despite our proclivity for asking searching questions in the context of philosophy. "Our" field was presented as almost wholly an endeavor by white European and American men. The inclusion of women, much less of people of color, was not on the agenda. It is from the standpoint of the present moment's focus on issues of gender and racial identity and of intersectionality that I can regret my unconsciousness at the time. But regret it I do; unconsciousness, especially in such vexed matters as race or sex, is never a good thing at any time, whatever the exact conditions under which it occurs.

If I had an interest in social and political matters in those early years, it was more from a spirit of *noblesse oblige* than from any deeper empathic ties with those whose lives were subject to deprivation and violence. For such a failure I do not hold my upwardly mobile, middle-class parents responsible; they were struggling to give their son a head start in a world that no longer knew the struggles of the Great Depression from which they had suffered when young. Nor can I indict my teachers: I was very lucky to study with Bernstein, Wilfrid Sellars, Paul Weiss, and George Schrader at Yale, and later with John Wild and William Earle at Northwestern. These were all extraordinary educators, and I was extremely fortunate to be their student, but few of them were politically engaged. The exception was Bernstein, who went to Mississippi in the summer of 1964; he had brought the young Martin Luther King, Jr., to the Yale campus as early as 1958, when I heard him speak to a small audience. I was moved by King's quiet eloquence and his knowledge of Hegel more than by any determined political stance he took in his wide-ranging talk.

The fault for the oblivion lay with myself: I failed to engage myself in the great social and political issues of the time in any direct and committed way. I was in Paris in the early Vietnam era, and I left there two years before May '68. Not only did I miss out on the major political events of

that tumultuous time, I *evaded them* by my intense continuing studies: evaded them in effect if not in conscious intent. There were a few exceptional moments: from Paris, I wrote a letter that was published in the *New York Times* in 1966, defending King's critique of the Vietnam War (a critique the *Times* had dismissed out of hand). But I wasn't on any of the front lines in this epoch of demonstrations and rising political consciousness.

How did I let myself fall victim to such blindness and paralysis? The fault cannot be laid to the institutions of which I was a part in those early years—even if they were actively complicitous in promoting a sense of self-satisfied well-being among their students and faculty. Kingman Brewster, who became president of Yale about the time when I returned to teach there in 1968, was publicly supportive of justice for the Black Panthers in the famous New Haven trial. My African-American colleague and friend Ken Mills was outspoken in student demonstrations that I attended that year and the next. But where were the roots of my larger failure to take a more actively participatory role in the events of the day?

One root lay in the fact that the kind of philosophy I was practicing in those years—for instance, writing an “eidetics of the imagination,” as Paul Ricoeur put it—was not concerned with *locating* the philosopher. But a deeper source lay in my willingness to allow the recognition and support I was receiving at that time from various sources—universities and fellowship committees (a Fulbright allowed me to study in Paris in 1964–66)—to give me a false sense of self-confidence: was I not doing things right by receiving such attention, including job interviews at Stanford, Duke, and UC Santa Barbara when I was first looking to teach after I received my doctorate from Northwestern in 1967? I had graduated into the world of academia, and this world became for me a place that stood apart from the social movements of the time. I can now see that I had accepted the academic habit of trading on the prestige of the institutions where I had been a student (and later a young faculty member), accepting the professional stroking that was due as much to this prestige as to any merit of my own. I was in effect taking a ride—a free ride offered to me as white, male, and upper-middle class.

Buoyed up by advantages I had never earned and of whose social reality I was only marginally aware, I withdrew into the halls of higher learning in New Haven, Evanston, and Paris. At Oxford in 1972–73 on a special fellowship, I was writing the first of a series of books that were meant to be rigorous phenomenological studies of imagination, memory, feeling, and thinking. I managed to write the first text in this series and half of the second when things began to change radically in my life.

II

Soon after, the bubble burst within the world of academia where I was situated. I experienced my first direct immersion in political struggle. In this case, the struggle occurred within the academy rather than without. It took the form of a bitter and pitched battle over the future identity of the Yale philosophy department. Ruth Marcus had arrived from Northwestern, determined to change the public face of the Yale department from the generous pluralism of the 1950s and 1960s to a more narrowly focused analytical tenor. I defended my friend David Carr in a long article in the *Yale Daily News* when he was denigrated by Marcus in department meetings and elsewhere. I paid a price for this gesture of support: Marcus saw to it that I was denied tenure when I came up the following year. This was in effect a petty politics of contention and retribution; nevertheless, it was a chapter in *Realpolitik* that profoundly affected my life. I realized that philosophy is not the benevolent institution I had assumed it to be from my fortunate earlier experiences in the field. It was a fraught field filled with winners and losers—with stakes higher than I had ever imagined in my protected years as a student and fledgling instructor.

It was in the same period of time—the early 1970s—that the pluralist movement emerged in the Eastern APA: a movement dedicated to contesting the growing hegemony of analytical philosophy in the U.S. I joined this group with a new sense of political purpose, determined to secure an open berth and fair treatment for continental and other forms of non-analytical philosophy in America. It was my first full immersion in political work for a cause I knew was just. I actively participated in covert planning sessions led by Bruce Wilshire and others, devising strategies for bringing about the democratization of the APA at every level: selection of committees, full recognition of the specialized societies, and main program events whose topics engaged both analysts and pluralists. By the time I was elected president of the Eastern Division in 2010, this work had been accomplished—accomplished for the most part at least, though it remains the case that “eternal vigilance is the price of [fairness],” to modify an archetypal epigram chiseled on the façade of the National Archive building in Washington.

III

Meanwhile, I had to find a job. After the Yale debacle of 1975, I had the good fortune of being offered a position at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. This was to prove liberating in several basic

ways. I returned to painting in a serious way, having set this aside from the time of boarding school. My writing took a new turn as my book on memory moved from within the narrow confines of a mentalistic model to a recognition of the role of body and place in memory: two very concrete dimensions neglected in most earlier accounts of remembering. A lecture I gave at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in 1983 had the title "Keeping the Past in Mind." The point of this talk was that memory *cannot be kept in mind* (or, for that matter, in the brain). It must be sought elsewhere in actual bodily engagements and in the places where these engagements are situated. This was the opening move in two decades of writing on the neglected importance of place in philosophy. I felt I had found a bedrock that had lain concealed for much too long underneath the machinations of mind, an infatuation with sensation, and the analytics of language.

But being at Stony Brook had yet another, still more salutary effect: I was now, at long last, in a scene of genuinely *public education*—the kind of education that John Dewey had long advocated and that was forcefully expressed in his remarkable book *Democracy and Education*. It is shocking to me in retrospect that I did not begin to come to grips with the public sphere of educational praxis until I arrived at Stony Brook in 1978 (I had spent the previous twenty-four years in exclusively private institutions). I found the undergraduate students there altogether lively and intensely challenging—much more outspoken and willing to contest the views of their fellow students and of their teachers—than anything I had encountered at Yale or Northwestern. These students were often (and still are) the offspring of first- and second-generation immigrants to this country, many of whom had recently settled on Long Island or in one of the New York City boroughs. Their energy, their passion, their deeply *caring* for finding the truth about any given issue led me to realize that the classroom can be a very different kind of place compared with the staid environments to which I had become accustomed in my previous experience as a student and teacher. At the same time, the graduate students at Stony Brook were extraordinarily committed to continental philosophy, and they inspired me to articulate my own thoughts on matters of place and time, body and art. Along with my participation in the pluralistic movement, all this constituted the opening stage of a profound awakening on my part.

Another dimension of this awakening was my beginning to teach alongside women colleagues for the first time—women of considerable intellect and deep commitment to issues of social justice: I have in mind Eva Kittay and Mary Rawlinson in particular; they were joined later by Kelly Oliver and (all too briefly) Linda Alcoff. In their presence, any sense

I had had that philosophy is exclusively a male enterprise melted into thin air. I became conscious of myself as a male professor with all the privileges this brings with it. It soon became clear to me that women are not only the equals of men in philosophy but often superior—more original, more perspicuous, more persistent, more able to discern the inherent relationality of human lives. Eva Kittay's work on disability in particular was a major revelation and allowed me to reconsider my sister's lifetime of suffering in a new light. Other revelations have arisen later. I think of Mary Rawlinson's pioneering work on the global labor market and its effects on food production and consumption; Anne O'Byrne's writings on the importance of natality, genealogy, and genocide; Allegra de Laurentiis's combination of first-class scholarship in Hegel with a commitment to Marxism; and Megan Craig's current focus on end-of-life care and autism. In my growing appreciation of the merits of my female colleagues I was coming to engage in another form of political work: I was overcoming a sexist view that had rendered me blind to these merits in earlier years.

From these women and others, I came to a very different vision of doing philosophy on a more communitarian model, that of a "multi-voiced body" (in Fred Evans' telling phrase) which emphasizes the other's well-being rather than one's own. I gained a vision of philosophy that was less ego-centric and mono-centric than I had imbibed from the transcendental strain in Husserl and Heidegger and the early Sartre—and that my own life up to then had exemplified. Also integral to this vision and a crucial component of my new life at Stony Brook was the realization that different races belong integrally to the same multi-voiced body and call for express recognition. Fueled by this more expansive sensibility, when I was chair in the mid-nineties, I actively recruited two African-American philosophers to join our department—Harvey Cormier and Lorenzo Simpson—and I strongly supported the efforts of my colleague Gary Mar to create courses in Asian-American philosophy as well as an Asian-American center in the halls of our department. (Gary also took a leading role in establishing a permanent place for Asian-American philosophy in the APA, an effort I strongly supported when I was president of the Eastern Division.)

IV

All that—my coming to Stony Brook, where I am still happily ensconced—can be considered the second stage of my life in the discipline. And the third phase? It represents no grand synthesis, but something that has often taken the form of what could be called "dual pursuit." Indeed,

my whole time in philosophy has been spent in several sorts of such pursuit: first, philosophy and psychoanalysis, then philosophy and painting (culminating in a group show two years ago in New York); and, more recently, a third form of such doubling: philosophy and engaged political action. I am in the midst of this last phase now, having come to it under the direct inspiration of my partner, Mary Watkins. As we have seen, the isolation and privilege of my earlier career kept me—I kept myself—at a distance from the most searing events of those times. Despite this, my political heart was in the right place: I was never anything but liberal, and sometimes radical, in my thinking. I joined demonstrations and marches at critical moments: for instance, protests at the U.N. against the Chinese genocide and culture-cide in Tibet and the massive march in New York against the invasion of Iraq in February 2003. But a full-fledged praxiological component was missing; I had no coherent agenda in the political realm, just strong beliefs: I remained at the level of *doxa* rather than informed *praxis*. I was quite aware of this, perplexed by it, yet remained for the most part immobilized. It was as if teaching and writing—and my growing family—took up all my fiercely focussed attention, leaving little extra energy for action in the wider world.

All this changed when I began to spend serious time at the U.S.-Mexico border in the company of Mary. At first, we made repeated visits to certain cities along the wall—especially Tijuana and Nogales—but eventually we decided to travel along the entire border from Brownsville to San Diego. Everywhere, we saw the indelible signs of a monstrously outsized structure, propped up by continual construction and a heavily militarized border patrol—all to the tune of many billions of dollars and untold human suffering. Yet it was not at all clear that the wall was effective in its purported mission—to control immigration from Mexico and Central and South America. Many managed to get over or around the wall, though many also died in the effort, perishing in the deserts of Texas and Arizona. This tragic dimension raises the question: Why limit drastically the numbers of immigrants who are fleeing from political persecution or dire economic poverty—often generated by the actions of the U.S. itself (most conspicuously in the case of the NAFTA accord of 1994)? Many of those seeking admission to the United States had no intention of remaining in this country, contrary to the fears of conservative critics. The vast majority of those who choose to remain in the U.S. have become exemplary members of American society. The manifest injustice of the circumstance, combined with its very high financial, human, and political costs, convinced Mary and myself that we should write a book setting out our considered perspective on this tragic and self-undermining situation: this became *Up Against the*

Wall: Re-imagining the U.S.-Mexico Border Wall, published last year. We found ourselves in opposition to walling out forced migrants anywhere, and sought to warn against this proclivity worldwide. Unfortunately, a virtually unchecked proliferation of the impulse to wall out the other has now become all too apparent as walls are constructed in one situation after another.

Up Against the Wall represents a decided step in the direction I am here identifying as a third stage in my evolving life in philosophy. Other recent writings of mine have pointed in the same direction: a study of racism at the border, the experience of prisoners in solitary confinement with respect to the body and place of this radical subjection, and an essay on the Occupy movement from the perspective of its specifically spatial dimension: the parks as well as the streets where occupation took place. Currently, I am seriously considering teaching philosophy in prison—following a path first cleared courageously by my former student Drew Leder some twenty years ago, as detailed in his remarkable book about this experience, *The Soul Knows No Bars*. Doing this is the only commitment that might lure me into retirement, which I have been steadily resisting on every other ground.

To do this would be not just another chapter in my history of ambidextrous activities. It would represent a fundamental re-orientation of my life, including my life in philosophy. But even if it became my primary (pre) occupation, it would not mean my leaving the profession, but pursuing philosophy by other means and in other places. It would be the actional equivalent of political theory—in the spirit of William James' idea of "the moral equivalent of war," except that practical action would now take precedence over ethical analysis. It would mean a reversal in my life in philosophy—not a reversal into the opposite, *enantiodromia* in Heraclitus' pungent term—but an organic turning toward that which I missed, that which I failed to do, that to which I was blind, in the opening years of my immersion in the field. This last phase, if it comes to pass, will be the actualization of "the way not taken" earlier—undertaken at long last with decisiveness—and from a strong sense of felt necessity.

V

Fine, you may be saying to yourself, I'm glad that Ed has finally awakened from his sheltered slumber and come around to a more responsible social and political consciousness. But you might also be wondering, what does this have to do with his *practice of philosophy*—and with phenomenology in particular? In the case of John Dewey, there was a

manifest link between his extensive social and political engagement and his brand of experimental pragmatism. For him, philosophy takes its rise from what he liked to call a “problematic situation.” It is in and through such a situation that one begins to think philosophically—rather than from abstract concepts or formal systems.

Phenomenology takes its cues from situations in the surrounding world that occasion “wonder” (a term first found in Plato and Aristotle and redeployed by Husserl, Fink, and Merleau-Ponty). These situations may not always be problematic, but they must be such as to elicit what Heidegger calls “the question of Being”—the question of *how things are in relation to how they might be*. From there it is not a giant step to *how things should be—should be different*. And with the latter, we take ourselves directly into real-life dilemmas and political challenges that act to engage us in our core. This is not merely a matter of crossing the line from Fact to Value. In phenomenology, facts as facts have been suspended, and values are not objective. Instead, everything that matters is *embedded* in the life-world, immanent in this world. Doing phenomenology means returning to what Husserl called “the sphere of immanence.” But where Husserl meant by this the domain of pure consciousness, in his successors immanence has come to mean the realm of concrete sensibility and material praxis: the “life-world.” When immanence is expanded in this way, it draws upon Sartre in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (I refer to the “practico-inert”), Jean-Luc Nancy in *Being Singular Plural* and *Corpus*, and especially Deleuze in several major works. Deleuze refers pointedly to “the plane of immanence,” by which he means a level of being in which everything is immanent in it but it (the plane itself) is not immanent in anything else. As Deleuze puts it, this plane (however differently construed by different thinkers) “constitutes the absolute ground of philosophy, its deterritorialized earth, the foundation on which it creates its concepts.”⁴ Transcendences of every kind—including “objects” and “subjects”—are expressions of a displaced immanence. The plane of immanence itself contains nothing reified or static: it is the realm of sheer becoming and its ontological status is that of virtuality. Deleuze came to call immanence “pure,” but on my reading immanence is altogether concrete, altogether engaged, and composed of bristling singularities.⁵

If my work belongs to any single strand of phenomenology or post-phenomenology, it is to this immanentist tendency. After my first work on imagination—which takes us out of the immanent into a mode of momentary transcendence thanks to what I called its “thin autonomy”—I came increasingly to seek out ways by which human experience is characterized by deeply immanent factors such as body and place,

glance and edge. Each of these parameters of lived experience takes us *into* the meshwork of things, states of affairs, and entire situations: each in its own way. Our bodies are the very means of insertion into the immanent, not just as instruments but by their immersive powers; places are, in turn, *where* we get immersed, the locus of corporeal involvement. It is by glances that we find our way about the immediate scene in which we find ourselves and by which we pick out the marks of the presence of other beings that co-occupy this same scene; and the scene itself comes densely edged—not only by horizons and other external perimeters, but from within by a tissue of intercalated edges. Thanks to the dynamic assemblage of all four factors, we find ourselves “diving into the wreck,” in Adrienne Rich’s resonant phrase. We live in the very midst of animate and inanimate entities of the most diverse sorts.

Prominent among such entities are other human beings: the more deeply ensconced we become—the more situated in immanence—the better are we able to take account of those of our kind who have special needs. These needs can be physical or psychical or, less dramatically but still importantly, needs of companionship, friendship, recognition, or support. To do phenomenology as I am here envisioning it is to be descriptively responsible to the domain of immanence—not for the sake of a *catalogue raisonné* of human needs or their mere typology—but to be sensitive to these various needs in ways that call for a concerted response on our part: to be moved to do something so as to meet, or at least to try to alleviate, the manifest needs of those with whom we share a life-world at this level.

Which is *our level*, the level of all of us—however diversely configured and populated it may be, and however differential our responses to it may be. Here fact and value merge to the point that we cannot tell their difference in any definitive way. Here, *down here below* (in the title of Abby Lincoln’s song), we live in immanence together. This includes those who may be indifferent to the tribulations of others, not from malice but from lacking an extended empathic outreach to these others. Part of teaching—and not just in the classroom—is to inculcate more adequate sensitivities to what other humans are undergoing. Not so as to instill a sense of infinite responsibility to the Other as on a Levinasian model, but so as to encourage a more acute awareness of what we can do to intervene to offer help when this is appropriate, and also (equally important) to engage in self-critique when one realizes the syndromes into which one has (often unwittingly) fallen such as sexism, racism, and nationalist chauvinism. Yancy’s “Letter to White America” or Irigaray’s “Ethics of Sexual Difference” are exemplary efforts to instill

such self-critique. They carry forward Paolo Freire's earlier project of a pedagogy of *conscientization*. This pedagogy, pursued elsewhere, will be *for the people*—initially, the impoverished and illiterate people of Brazil—but such that this pedagogy is designed and enacted in ways that are culturally specific to any group of people who pursue it rather than being imposed on them from a place of presumed superiority.

VI

In my own case, I was forcefully inducted into the immanent sphere of human needs by becoming my sister's caretaker. After our parents died in our early twenties, I was suddenly in the role of *loco parentis* for Connie for the rest of her life—some fifty years. In this role, not only did I come to know the netherworld of psychosis with all its confusions and unintelligibilities, and of anger and rage (on my part as well as hers). I was inducted into the world of the mentally ill, forced to face the systematic neglect to which seriously disturbed individuals are subject in American society. After the closing of state mental hospitals in the wake of Reagan's reign as governor of California—contemporary with the advent of mass incarceration in "the war on drugs" inaugurated shortly before that—many former patients found themselves on the street or in board and care homes. My sister's fate was the latter. Even if not as risky as being homeless, it was not a happy solution. Connie found herself thrown together with other deeply troubled souls in situations lacking any competent care or even elementary empathy. My sister would often rebel against these degrading circumstances—precipitating her forcible eviction from one board and care home after another and requiring desperate, urgent searches for the next place to live.

I recount this not for its dramatic tenor, nor to elicit your sympathy. I cite it because of what it taught me and what I gained from it. Because of my sister's perilous situation, I was drawn into very intense scenes of suffering human beings, where I came to know those who were the victims of a state of mind which few understood and for which no fully effective cures are available. I was ushered into the presence of many whom I came to admire for their pluck and outright courage in the face of formidable obstacles and in the absence of anything like what many of us would regard as a "good life." I was able to realize how much those who are not similarly afflicted take mental health for granted, and also how much many people cower behind a claim to being "normal" when their own psychical abnormality is manifest or lurks just under the surface. Being in the company of my sister, I learned of the fragility of what Karl Menninger called "the vital balance." For many, all too many,

any such balance is not only elusive but unattainable. This is all the more the case when poverty, racial oppression, and the effects of being a veteran in American's various imperialist wars precipitate disturbed and disturbing lives.

VII

I am supremely grateful to my sister and to her fellow and sister sufferers in the world of the mentally ill for all I learned and came to appreciate in that world. Being part of her troubled life gave me an education of its own, fully as valuable as my extensive formal education in philosophy itself. It was an education in the range of suffering on the part of those diagnosed as psychotic or schizophrenic. The suffering was not only mental; it extended to every domain of life, physical (obesity is rampant among this population, often traceable to the side-effects of antipsychotic drugs) and economic (most are living on a skimpy SSI check of less than \$1,000 a month). And it included abusive treatment at the hands of uncaring caretakers.

Connie gave me the immense gift of showing me radically different ways of being in the world. These are ways that were barely dreamed of in my philosophy, even if my chosen manner of practicing philosophy has come to make room for them. My explorations in philosophical psychology, in writing as in teaching, gained a dimension they would never have otherwise possessed.

A measure of how much I owe to my sister is the fact that her recent and sudden death left me bereft in a very special way: it made me realize how much I had come to need *her*—out of my own need to accompany her in her desperate life.⁶

A life spent in increasing immersion in immanence, whether in the public domain or in relation to the needs of a sibling, proceeds according to literally immeasurable criteria and in keeping with an uncontrollable calendar. The simple truth is that as I had to go into philosophy, so also I had to take care of my sister. Despite all the manifest differences between the two situations, being my sister's keeper was as definitive of my adult life as has been my pursuit of philosophy.

VIII

Caring for my sister thrust me into a world of intense immanence—took me there body and soul—in a manner that is strikingly parallel to the move to the density and force of the immanent that I find to be continental philosophy's deepest thrust from Husserl to Nancy and Deleuze and that I was to take myself in my written work and my teaching. It catapulted me into this world before my philosophizing caught up with it. The labor of my slowly evolving thought was belated compared to this baptism by fire. In the part of my life devoted to my sister, I was living on the plane of immanence that I arrived at years later as a consciously held philosophical position. Looking back, I realize that the compartmentalization of my two lives—academic and personal—was extreme, even if I was barely aware of the gap at the time: *I was doing both because I felt I had to do each.*

Only gradually, indeed not fully until writing this lecture, did I come to realize how closely intertwined these lives have been; how much, in its own way, each life was sending me into immanence. Yet the two modes of immanence—lived and thought—were not altogether disconnected. I now believe that becoming intimately familiar with the world of the deeply troubled prepared the ground for my development as a philosopher who found himself seeking an ever more adequate model of immanence. In that model, there is ample room for tribulation as well as triumph. What matters is that the plane of immanence, whether as undergone or as conceptually posited, is able to embrace these extreme states as well as others—that being down here below provides space for all comers, mentally stable or not, colored or white, female and male and trans. It calls for a genuinely “radical empiricism” of the personal and the familial, the social and the political.⁷

A certain way of doing philosophy that I pursued over the past half century proves to be consonant with certain ways of concrete being-in-the-world. It is not the only way to achieve such consonance. It converges with Dewey's model of an engaged pragmatism in the service of “radical democracy”; other convergences are with Marxist social theory, critical race theory, many forms of feminism, various strands of deconstruction (most notably, those pursued by Derrida and Lyotard), and ordinary language philosophy in the hands of Austin and Cavell. Still others include important strands of Hinduism and Islam and an “engaged Buddhism.” Across all the differences in these ways of doing philosophy, I see a rich array of inroads into the plane of immanence; rightly so, for it is this very plane that welcomes a vast variety of ways in which human beings co-inhabit the life-worlds they experience so

diversely. (This is not to mention animals and plants, the vast oceans and “the blue mountains constantly walking”⁸—the planet in short: a story for another time.)

IX

If there is any common bond between the otherwise disparate systems of thought just mentioned, it can be found in their employment of what I like to call “radical reflection.” About such reflection (which he prefers to call “hyper-reflection”), Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible* that

[it] must not lose sight of the brute thing and the brute perception and would not finally efface them [in favor of something transcendent to them]. . . . It must plunge into the world instead of surveying it, it must descend toward it such as it is instead of working its way back toward a prior possibility of thinking it—which would impose upon the world in advance the conditions for our control over it.⁹

Merleau-Ponty here captures the move to the sphere of immanence that I have found to be a *Leitfaden*, a guiding thread in my life in philosophy—and in my life, period. “Radical reflection” is not just another philosophical method, to be ranged with phenomenological bracketing or eidetic variation. It is an entire practice of thrusting oneself, or allowing oneself to be thrust, into the plane of immanence, going down under transcendental conditions of possibility as well as categories and forms: down to a level of experience that is operative at all times and places, however differently expressed culturally and linguistically they may be. Even if I find it best formulated by Merleau-Ponty, it is by no means peculiar to phenomenology.

Radical reflection entails a form of immersion that is at stake in every return to the immanence of the life-world—whether the immanence of perception or of spontaneous speaking, of mental health or its lack, of injustice or the just life, or “just life” (in the title of Mary Rawlinson’s recent book). The point is that unless and until we come to terms with this level of experience, this plane of deep immanence, we cannot cope creatively with the problematic situations that confront us every day and in every phase of life—with all the ways that each of us, no matter how comfortably situated, is living on the edge: if not the edge of physical or mental collapse or climate disaster, then that of the oncoming unknown,

whatever form it may assume. All this takes time, and, finally, a lifetime. No wonder: as Merleau-Ponty adds, “little by little it is the whole of experience . . . that requires reconsideration.”¹⁰

If I were to answer in one sentence the question with which I started—what is it I been doing all my life *in philosophy*?—it would be that all along I’ve been seeking the right kind of radical reflection, which for me has meant extending the range of phenomenological inquiry beyond the limits charted by the pioneers in the field. But if you ask me what have I been doing *all my life* (including my life in philosophy but also apart from it)? I would have to say that I have been looking for ways to be an effective presence in all the perilous situations that being an adult brings with it, ranging from the perils of finding a job and tenure, finding a true partner—and, for all too many, skirting mental illness, suffering from a racism and sexism that doesn’t know its own name, and much more. All of these situations call for radical reflection—for continual reconsideration of challenging circumstances which we must not only understand better formally and historically, but also alter materially and substantially in the direction of greater justice. Both modes of radical reflection, understanding and acting, call for engaging ever more actively and discerningly in the plane of immanence that holds both sides of a human life together—mine as well as yours.

* * *

Erik Erikson, in his discussion of “The Seven Ages of Man,” says that the last stage of life has two distinctive traits. One is sagacity: this I cannot, and shall not, claim. The other is gaining the sure sense that one’s life “had to be so.” To the latter I can attest. It has been a theme of this talk from the beginning: the sense that I had to go into philosophy, then that I had to take care of my sister; more recently, that I must enter into social and political engagement at long last. None of this has been a matter of strict necessity; of course, it could have turned out otherwise; I might have become a painter or a psychiatrist or a city planner; but if I did not, this had to do with the fortuitous coalescing of various factors—finding that book by Santayana, being in Richard Bernstein’s class, being awarded a Carnegie teaching fellowship, and having a dissertation advisor, William Earle, who counseled me not to become a scholar of continental philosophy but to *practice* it: Bill was the very rare philosopher of his generation who had done just this, and I sought to emulate him.

In a certain way my time in philosophy has had to be so; it certainly was so. Putting it this way sounds rather sternly finalistic—too much like

it's all over. But this is not my final act. I am looking forward to other chapters. We have seen that the three stages by which I first schematized my talk today did not hold fast upon further inspection. Aspects of the third stage were anticipated in the second (my subjection to the politics of analytical vs. continental philosophy, my participation in the pluralist movement, my first experiences in public education and with women colleagues): I was already on the way to the more specific engagements I sought later on. The long chapter as my sister's companion spanned all three stages, and it directly forecast all that was to come and helped to make it possible.

I am looking forward—not to a distinct fourth stage, but to a series of steps, not all of them going in the same direction, but each of which I expect to be as challenging as it is fulfilling. I would like to think that what Cézanne said about a painting—that “it should be complete at every stage even if never finished”—holds true as well of my remaining time on earth.

I had a premonition of all this recently when I was walking past several sizeable polished slabs of marble, each propped up vertically. Looking into some of the very dark surfaces, I could see the bare profile of a body etched fleetingly on the surface: suddenly I realized that this body was mine, even if the only evidence was my bare silhouette. Other marble surfaces, more lightly colored, offered no such images: in front of them, I had in effect disappeared from view—from my own view.

I'd like to end with the thought that in looking ahead at any time of life one can only see oneself in a surface darkly and often not even that: it is the mostly unknown or the altogether unknown at which one looks. It is then that one realizes that the immanence of one's life, one's immersion *in* life, has been, and is, both compelling *and* vanishing, calling one to commit oneself to what is largely if not entirely undiscovered. Yet in making this commitment—whether it is to the pursuit of newly creative philosophical ideas or to the alleviation of others' suffering in the context of social justice, or both—one realizes a form of well-being not otherwise attainable. I'd like to think that philosophy, at its best, leads us to some such creativity and into some concrete form of that alleviation. And I'd like to think that over a lifetime I have contributed something to each of these ways of being a philosopher.

NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 1. Translation modified.
2. Ibid.

3. For this term, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 190: a probe-head “dismantles [fixed] strata in their wake, breaks through the walls of significance.”
4. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 41. I have modified the translation somewhat.
5. On the plane of immanence, see chapter two of *What Is Philosophy?* as well as the essay “Immanence: A Life” (in Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman [New York: Urzone, 2002]): “Immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself” (p. 27). Everything that philosophers have taken to be transcendent—Form, God, the Self, the Other, Thing—is “a product of immanence” (p. 31). These putative transcendences are actualizations of what is on the plane of immanence purely virtual: indeed, “the plane of immanence is itself virtual” (31). It is composed of events, multiplicities, and haecceities that are singular in status.
6. See Katie Wolfe, “Vulnerability’s Demands: Need and the Relational Self” (Ph.D. dissertation defended, December 2015) and Mary Watkins, “Psychosocial Accompaniment,” *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2015).
7. Deleuze employs William James’ phrase in this sentence: the plane of immanence “is, perhaps, a radical empiricism. . . . [Such] empiricism knows only events and other people and is therefore a great creator of concepts.” (*What Is Philosophy?*, 47–48).
8. This is the title of a chapter in Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Washington: Shoemaker and Hoard, 1990).
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern Press, 1973), 38–39. Lingis translates *sur-réflexion* as “hyper-reflection.”
10. *Ibid.*, 46. The translation has “that would require reconsideration.”