Practicing Philosophy in the Experience of Living: Philosophy as a Way of Life in the American Philosophical Tradition

Kenneth W. Stikkers

The 2013 World Congress of Philosophy, held in Athens, Greece, the cradle of Western philosophy, could not have chosen a theme friendlier to the American philosophical tradition: “Philosophy as Inquiry and Way of Life.” Indeed, from its beginnings in Puritanism and until only relatively recently, philosophy in America has been intimately entwined with the concrete experiences of everyday living, in ways that one does not find in modern Europe. This essay identifies two main reasons for this integration of philosophical inquiry and practice with everyday life – one ontological and the other historical. First, American philosophy resisted modernist logics of identity and difference, as described by Michel Foucault, which alienated language and thought from experience, and thereby maintained “a feeling for the world,” to borrow an expression from Ernst Cassirer (1963, 187), wherein philosophy was experienced and conducted as part of the fabric of everyday practices. Second, America, due to unique historical circumstances, enjoyed a long tradition of vigorous philosophical conversation outside the institutions of higher learning, in sites of everyday living and much to the benefit of her philosophy.

American Philosophy and the Logics of Similitude: Evading the Logics of Difference and Alienation

Stanley Cavell rightfully notes that the central problem of modernity for American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson was that of skepticism, by which Emerson meant not merely epistemological skepticism – questioning whether or not the world in itself is knowable – but a much deeper, existential skepticism whereby one’s very relationship to the world is called into question, and one no longer experiences the world as one’s own nurturing home but as an alien, unknowable, even hostile realm. In “The American Scholar,” for instance, Emerson famously warned Americans of the loss of “an original relation to the universe,” stemming from a tendency of American scholars to view the world through the lens of philosophical abstractions imported from Europe rather
than rooting their philosophies and literatures in the first-hand experiences of life in America (Emerson 1957, 21). The antidote for such skepticism is recovery of an aesthetic sense of the ordinary, and this means that philosophy must cease from partaking in professionalized, European games of skepticism but present itself “as a way of life,” that is, as thinking within the fabric of everyday living (cf. Cavell 1990, 62).

William James, too, strongly influenced by Emerson especially on this matter, warned about a growing separation of science, and philosophy attempting to imitate the positive sciences, from life. He wrote, for instance:

This systematic denial on science’s part of the personality as a condition of events, this rigorous belief that in its own essential and innermost nature our world is a strictly impersonal world, may conceivably, as the whirligig of time goes round, prove to be the very defect that our descendants will be most surprised at in our boasted science, the omission that to their eyes will most tend to make it look perspectiveless and short.

James 1986, 136–137

The very idea of a coldly indifferent, impersonal, objective world, as described by modern science, contributed to James depression and thoughts of suicide. His doctrines of pragmatism and radical empiricism were thus, in large measure, protests against such a world-view: they were efforts to restore the importance and even primacy of immediate experience to human existence and to reconnect thereby philosophy and science with life.

John Dewey, too, criticized, with a strong sense of urgency, how the philosophies and sciences of his day – natural and social sciences alike – anchored in an array of false metaphysical dichotomies, had grown increasingly disconnected from everyday, practical experience, and he attacked a pervasive notion of philosophical, scientific “reason,” conceived as detached from life, as extraexperiential. This detachment of reason from life manifest itself in philosophy’s increasing preoccupation with solving logical puzzles created by professional philosophers, and its decreasing concern with the concretely experienced problems of life – social as well as personal. As Dewey famously proclaimed in arguing “the need for a recovery of philosophy,” “Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men” (Dewey, MW 10, 46). By contrast to Rene Descartes’s method of skepticism, which did so much to foster Western philosophy’s preoccupation with epistemological certitude and hence to alienate philosophy