Experience, Interpretation, and Community

Experience, Interpretation, and Community: Themes in John E. Smith's Reconstruction of Philosophy

Edited by

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To the daughters of John E. Smith and Marilyn Schulhof Smith,

Diane E. Smith and Robin Smith Swanberg

[The recovery of philosophy] can happen only if everyone is prepared to abandon two claims; first, that any single approach to philosophy is the only legitimate one, and secondly, that those pursuing philosophical inquiry in any fashion other than one's own are *ipso facto* not engaged in philosophy at all. The first of these claims concerns respect for philosophy and the second respect for persons.
—John E. Smith

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Following Stanley Cavell, another contemporary philosopher to whom I am also deeply indebted, I am disposed to regard *acknowledgment* as an extremely important category (indeed, a distinctively philosophical category). This is, however, more than anything else due to the experiential weight possessed by the seemingly simple acts of acknowledgment and our too frequent failures to articulate adequate acknowledgment. Despite an acute sense of unavoidable failure, my experience drives toward expression—–the expression of acknowledgment and therein gratitude. The patience of the contributors of this volume has been equal to the quality of their essays, which is to say: Great! The assistance of Amanda Millar and the persistence of Carol Koulikourdi have been critical for the realization of this project.

After the original co-editor of this volume disappeared, my wife Jo Carubia assumed nothing less than that role. While she resolutely refused the title, honesty and gratitude require me to acknowledge her contribution to this project as the person who assisted me with every aspect of this endeavor (at critical points, actually taking over when other commitments intervened between me and the work of putting this volume together). In a different connection, John E. Smith himself quipped regarding the person who was my original co-editor: "He proved Dewey right – the opposite of appearance is not reality, but disappearance!" There is no equivalence for someone who appears in a steadfast manner for the time needed to realize a complex project, one made all the more difficult by broken promises and unforeseeable events. There is, alas, also no adequate means for acknowledging such sustaining friendship. Though it would have been appropriate to dedicate this volume to Jo or to her children, since she showed up and stood fast, shoulder to shoulder, every step of the way, it is even more appropriate to dedicate this book to the daughters of John and his wife Marilyn. My co-editor would have it no other way.

"Smith and Dewey on the Religious Dimension of Experience: Dealing with Dewey's Half-God" by Douglas R. Anderson appeared in slightly different form in *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* (volume 14, number 2 [May 1993]). Revised by the author and used by permission of the editor and the author.

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"Reparative Reasoning: From Peirce's Pragmatism to Augustine Scriptural Semiotic" by Peter Ochs appeared in slightly different form in *Modern Theology* 25:2, April 2009, p. 187-215. © Peter Ochs. Revised by the author and used by permission of the author.

INTRODUCTION

VINCENT M. COLAPIETRO

For John E. Smith (1921-2009), professional philosophy in the Anglo-American world, especially in the second half of the twentieth century and opening decade of the twenty-first, had become all too sterile and insular (too sterile principally because it had become too insular). In this, as in other respects, he was deeply Jamesian: "In a subject like philosophy, it is really fatal to lose connexion with the open air of human nature, and to think in terms of shop-tradition only." The professionalization of philosophy however tends toward the loss of just this connection, since "the rules of the professorial game" more or less insure that professors of philosophy "think and write from each other and for each other and at each other exclusively." The outcome of adhering to such rules is predictable: "With this exclusion of the open air all true perspective gets lost, extremes and oddities count as much as sanities, and command the same attention." As turned out to be true of Smith along with James, "[s]implicity of statement [not to mention eloquence] is deemed synonymous with hollowness and shallowness."[1] The quality of their prose counted against an appreciation of the substance and depth of their thought. In particular, the grace and verve with which they wrote rendered them suspicious, allegedly sacrificing logic for rhetoric.[2] In truth, the clarity and force of linguistic expression were, in these two instances, indicative of the substance and depth of philosophical thought.

Even worse than sterility and insularity, professional philosophy had in Smith's judgment become an inhumane discipline in which scoring points at the expense of others was the surest path to career advancement.[3] The pursuit of wisdom had degenerated into the ridicule of rivals, also the wholesale exclusion of alternative approaches. The clever refutation of one's rivals – rather than charitable understanding, measured criticism, and the careful articulation of a synoptic vision – mattered most. While Smith was appreciative of the genuine contributions of analytic philosophers to the ongoing exploration of thorny questions, he was as a philosopher chagrined and (at times) even enraged by the dismissive and reductive attitudes of those militantly committed to what can best be identified as

the disciplinary *ideology* of the analytic establishment.[4] His opposition was principally to this ideology, not the rich tradition of philosophical reflection exemplified in the most prestigious universities in the United States and Great Britain, including his own Department at Yale.[5] Indeed, he was deeply appreciative of the values of precision, clarity, rigor, and the critical marshalling of relevant evident for any substantive position (even if he did not suppose any one philosophical tradition had a monopoly on such disciplinary ideals). What however grieved him above all was the haughty disparagement by many analysts of what he sometimes called the grand tradition of Western philosophy (including metaphysics) and the systematic neglect of the actual history of philosophical thought, from the pre-Socratics to the present. He was indeed an indefatigable defender of both metaphysics and the history of philosophy. Too much of his career was taken up in battles fought simply to win a place for an approach to philosophy at odds with the dominant *ethos* of what he felt was an intolerant majority. Smith was, however, paradoxical in being both himself vigorous in his defense of his approach and genuinely conciliatory. This is nowhere more evident than in his Presidential Address in 1981 to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. He was a counterpuncher: he was not inclined to throw an initial punch but if swung at he would vigorously swing back. In "Philosophy in America Today" (1981), Richard Rorty recalls "Quine's quip that people go into philosophy for one of two reasons: some are interested in the history of philosophy, and some in philosophy."[6] Less well-known but even more deep-cutting is Smith's riposte: "We are all interested in the history of philosophy, but some of us go farther back than the last issue or two of *Mind* or *The Journal of Philosophy*."[7] In the years since Quine's dominance, the history of *analytic* philosophy itself has in effect deconstructed the dualism between philosophy and its history. The children of those who have taken the linguistic turn have themselves unquestionably taken a historical turn. While Quine's quip sounds quaint today, Smith's riposte rings with relevance.

Smith taught[8] and wrote about such thinkers as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Edwards, Peirce, James, Royce,[9] Dewey, Tillich and Whitehead as well as such topics as experience, interpretation, community, rationality, time, religion[10], art, science, education, ethics, and of course philosophy itself.[11] We begin to get a sense of who he was by appreciating what he so eloquently defended. For example, he defended the contemporary relevance of classical pragmatism and German idealism at a time when both movements had far more detractors than advocates. Actually, the situation was worse than this: those who felt entitled simply to ignore

these movements without apology or justification far outnumbered the detractors and advocates put together.

While the range of Smith's commitments is wide, they are more than a hodgepodge. One way to see the unity of his vision is to recall the "total reality" meriting philosophical acknowledgment.[12] "The total reality we find," he suggested, "must be represented as man-in-the-universe-interpreting the universe."[13] This implies a robust acknowledgment of the reflexive turn (we are not only interpreters but self-interpreters,[14] ineluctably driven to offer interpretations of our own processes and practices of interpretation). But, in Smith's case, the philosophical attempt to come to terms with the "total reality" always implies a resolute refusal to remain confined within a reflexive stance.[15] "Every critical or 'meta' standpoint [i.e., the reflexive turn in all of its diverse guises] has to face," Smith insists, "the question of its own status vis-à-vis the objects, languages, or types of thought which constitute its subject matter or domain of inquiry."[16] Our reflexive stance toward our investigation of the subject matter at hand (whatever the distinct field of philosophical inquiry) cannot be allowed to postpone indefinitely an actual inquiry into the salient details of the specific subject. If we are philosophically serious, we must move from (say) meta-ethics to ethics, from preliminary questions of method to the principal questions of substance.[17] We cannot adequately or responsibly interpret ourselves as interpreters of the universe without making substantive claims about the circumambient reality in which our ventures take place (in brief, without making claims about reality or the universe itself). In addition, we are required to proffer claims about the reality of humans (that is, ourselves). To be sure, the responsible execution of this philosophical task demands that distinctions be drawn, evidence marshaled, fallacies exposed, and much else, but the inevitably technical character of philosophical discourse has as its animating purpose a synoptic vision (or so Smith would argue).[18] James was strongly disposed to assert: "*Technical* writing on *philosophical* subjects … is certainly a crime against the human race!"[19] But he just as strongly realized that the philosophical treatment of any topic cannot help but assume, to some degree, technical form.[20] The inherent tension between an appropriately technical treatment of a philosophical subject and a humanly intelligible discourse imposes severe challenges, though Wittgenstein, Austin, Quine, Chisholm, Dummett, and Nagel no less than James, Santayana, Smith, Bernstein, Rorty, and Neville *show* how such challenges can be met. Highly sophisticated thought is articulated in finely crafted prose.

The thinkers, traditions, and texts to which John devoted his life were, more than anything else, resources for facilitating the task of humans-in-

the-universe-interpreting the universe (thus, their own endeavors to make sense out of their lives and their world). Adventures of ideas take the form of ventures in interpretation. In turn, such ventures are, at once, a series of invitations to return with heightened awareness and deepened humility to the disclosures of experience *and* an enactment (or realization) of community. In brief, interpretation (at least as conceived and practiced by Smith) is bound up with experience and community. At its best, it returns us to experience with more acute eyes and ears, more sensitive noses and fingers. The experienced carpenter's nose and fingers can often tell much about a piece of newly sawed wood by its smell and feel. Whatever we as philosophers mean by *experience*, it has to do justice to such expertise and sensitivity. At its best, interpretation also turns us to others or, more accurately, helps us discern the complex ways in which we are always already entangled with other interpreters, also helps us to respond to the exigency to consult others. The appeal to experience is here a communal task, just as the realization of community is inevitably a transformative experience.

Much of Smith's professional career was devoted to a series of rescue efforts, above all, attempts to rescue movements, figures, topics, and indeed branches of philosophy from neglect or ridicule. The philosophical motive underwriting these rescue efforts was an unwavering sense of their *contemporary* relevance. He was anything but an antiquarian, though he had a lively interest in the actual past in its irreducible otherness from the historical present. Moreover, he had a sharp distaste for intellectual anachronism, the tendency to interpret the past exclusively in categories drawn from the present. The past precisely as past must be given its due. But the present – *our* present – is far from simply a prolongation of the past, a fated continuation of established patterns. The present is shot through with novelty and possibility as much as repetition and continuity.[21] It is an opportunity to think anew, to re-envision the total reality in a markedly novel manner. Paradoxically, a critical engagement with our actual history alone equips us to execute this delicate task. The voice of philosophy will become increasingly inaudible if such a reconstruction is not undertaken.[22] The substance of philosophy will become increasing dry, thin, and impertinent to the actual lives of thoughtful people outside the professional discourses of trained philosophers if such a reconstruction does not turn upon the recovery of experience.[23]

Consider the historical resources for carrying out this philosophical task, more exactly, the resources most critical from Smith's perspective. But consider them as resources needing to be rescued in order to be used.

The American pragmatists were more – and better – than fuzzy precursors of, first, the logical positivists and, later, linguistic analysts. The form of empiricism espoused by them was not a prolongation of the classical British view any more than it was an anticipation of the logical empiricist position. It was something distinctively novel and potentially liberating.[24] Josiah Royce was something more than an historical curiosity, more than someone misguidedly heading East when the bulk of the population was migrating West (that is, championing philosophical idealism when more tough-minded philosophical positions were ascending to cultural dominance). The history of philosophy was more than a catalogue of errors, a risible collection of incompetent inquirers who committed countless examples of textbook fallacies. Hegel more – and better – than a willful obscurantist whose impenetrable prose provides professional philosophers with a ready excuse to ignore without a guilty conscience this historical figure (arguably, one of the greatest philosophical minds in human history). Metaphysics was part of the destiny of our thought, not a disease to be cured or a tendency to be expunged or a presumption to be ridiculed.[25] Religious commitment might be better than a vestige of a thoroughly discredited past. Interpretation is not necessarily a species of fabrication wherein our efforts bring forth nothing more than the capricious product of the hermeneutic imagination. Experience is more than a tissue of subjectivity, more than the privileged domain of a private consciousness. Philosophy itself "is not – or, at least, should not be – a ferocious debate between irritable professors."[26] It should be a rigorous yet humane exploration of questions confronting the human animal in its unbounded capacity for philosophical query.

Accordingly, Smith judged that John Dewey's call for the reconstruction of philosophy was as relevant in the second half of the twentieth century as it was in the second decade of that century. For Smith no less than Dewey, the reconstruction of philosophy demands the recovery of experience. In turn, the recovery of experience demands a creative appropriation of neglected philosophical traditions and figures.

"Experience," Smith argued, "needs to be rescued not only from the charge of subjectivity, but also from the restrictive force of approaching it only through expression, that is, through language." We must come to appreciate that our experience is itself a medium of disclosure and, then, to draw out the implications of this understanding .[27] In any event, human experience is far more than a random assemblage of sensory impressions (or "sense data"), especially when such impressions (or data) are taken to be passively received by our minds. It is nothing less than an encounter with reality, in truth, an ongoing dialogue between a symbol-using animal

and circumambient reality. Experience is not inherently subjective or subcutaneous.[28] But it is of course far from a transparent or diaphanous medium. The disclosures of our experience are not only partial and perspectival but also frequently distorted and even obfuscating. But part of the problem is our failure to exercise sufficient care and critical control over our interpretation of these disclosures. A straight stick partly submerged in water appearing bent to us is an optical illusion *and* an objective fact in the sense that, given the properties of the situation, a straight stick ought to appear bent. The distorting effects of specific contexts need to be acknowledged in our interpretations. In order for me to perceive what I perceive, I need to appeal to the witness of others. Consider the meaning of "seeing" in such a question as "Am I seeing things or did a cardinal appear on the bough of that tree in the middle of winter?" The self of one moment appeals to that of a later time (I rub my eyes and look again, trying to determine whether I am the victim of a hallucination), but in addition each one of us must corroborate our perceptions by a critical engagement with other perceivers. The community of inquirers (so celebrated by Peirce) and that of interpreters (so exalted by Royce) is always (at least) a community of observers, one in which perceivers try to square the deliverances of their own senses with the deliverances of others. At the most rudimentary level of our intellectual lives, then, corroboration is critical. Such a view does not efface unique individuals; rather it exhibits them in their true character – social actors animated by partly overlapping purposes, some of those purposes being so central and pervasive in the lives of those actors as to define (or identify) them.[29]

"Experience drives," Smith insists, "toward expression, which is why the finding of adequate language is a genuinely *creative* task."[30] In driving toward expression, experience in effect drives toward interpretation and mediation. I encounter a person with whom I am on cordial terms but upon meeting that individual I am greeted in anything but a cordial manner. Such an encounter is an instance of experience in Smith's sense.[31] But it is also an occasion for – indeed, an impetus to – interpretation. What explains the response of this individual to me on this occasion? How am I to make sense of this? What I am missing? We are driven to interpretation by our encounters with things and events, selves and their actions, endeavors, and artifacts.

Interpretation is inescapably communal, never purely solitary. To assume the role of interpreter demands participation in what Josiah Royce called a community of interpreters and Peirce the community of inquirers.

Our individuality is forged in and through our participation in a variety of communities.

But there is something misleading about this order of presentation (moving from experience to interpretation and, then, to community). Human experience is the encounter of a social actor with a circumambient reality inclusive of other such actors. Experience is what it is because of the communal attachments, engagements, and entanglements in and through which human beings acquire a singular identity and their recognizable humanity. In beginning with experience, properly understood, we begin with community or, at least, with what Dewey called the conjoint activities of human agents in the variable situations of their evolving lives. But the pressures, promptings, and perplexities of experience itself demand or at least invite us to strive to make sense out of what we are doing or simply what is happening. That is, interpretation is a process generated by the force of experience.

John E. Smith was (as Robert Neville is disposed to point out) first and foremost an essayist. He was not given to writing systematic treatises such as Dewey's *Experience and Nature* or Whitehead's *Process and Reality* or even Neville's own books. In a sense perhaps not sufficiently appreciated by even his greatest admirers, however, he was a philosophical essayist in the etymological sense: his essays were attempts. They were experiments in which he was striving and, in some measure, struggling to make deeper and wider sense out of the world, but a world inclusive of interpreters and inquirers, a world manifesting itself in diverse ways and contexts. The spirit of trying things out is discernible at every turn in his writings. There is thus something utterly appropriate about picking up three of the main themes in John E. Smith's philosophical project – experience, interpretation, and community – and exploring them in the form and spirit of this incomparable American philosopher. The spirit of American philosophy is of course evident only in the spirit of American *philosophers* (the accent must ultimately, if not also initially, fall on persons[32]), singular inquirers engaged in their distinctive struggles to make maximal sense out of their more or less communicable experience of nothing less than the enveloping universe. The contributors to this volume have not only learned much from John E. Smith but also have been encouraged by him to join in the work of thinking anew what this historical moment demands. As important as piecemeal analyses are, they are ultimately valuable only insofar as they contribute to traditional task of crafting a synoptic vision of human life, articulated in such a manner as to guide our actions. Each one of the essays in this volume, however

apparently modest in scope, is a contribution to the articulation of nothing less than such a vision.

"The decline of philosophy as an influential voice in the intellectual exchange within our culture has been," Smith suggests, "the result of several questionable conceptions that have dominated much of modern philosophy since the seventeenth century." The recovery of philosophy involves both a critique of these conceptions and, more constructively, the detailed elaboration of alternative visions of human experience, our hermeneutic ventures, and the most basic forms of our communal attachments. So,

> if, as philosophers, we saw ourselves not as practitioners of a specialty with a technical language, but as reflective thinkers seeking to describe, interpret and illuminate lived experience by making more precise the vague expressions of ordinary communication, we would more successfully fulfill our function and still retain [or regain] a voice in the intellectual dialogue of the culture.[33]

It is in such a spirit that these essays are presented to those who remain desirous to make sense out of their experience of the world into which they have been thrown.

PART I

TALKING ABOUT RELIGION IN PUBLIC

JOHN K. ROTH

> When we find ourselves in the presence of languages other than our own, differences of religion and culture, different historical periods, we need an interpreter or someone who understands several languages, religions, or historical periods.

This essay's epigraph was not only written by the philosopher John E. Smith (1921-2009), it describes him. He understood different languages, religions, historical periods, and more. Evidence to support that claim is abundant in "Experience, God, and Classical American Philosophy," the article from which his statement comes.[1] The need for mediating interpreters such as Smith has probably never been greater, because differences in our country and world—including those of religion, culture, and historical perspective—are acute, troubling, and often violent. In the early twenty-first century, the relationships among the world's major monotheistic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—provide telling examples. From the terror attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, to the mass shootings in Norway in July 2011, with tensions in the Middle East added in, events underscore the growing importance of healing ways to talk about religion in public.[2]

My study of classical American philosophy and John Smith's thought began in earnest about fifty years ago. In the late summer of 1962, I traveled to New Haven, Connecticut, from a Southern California much less crowded and much more tranquil than today's. Recently graduated from Pomona College, I was a stranger to New England when I began graduate study at Yale University. That destination took me to the Department of Philosophy at the Yale Graduate School but not immediately. First, I spent the 1962-63 academic year at Yale's Divinity School.

Shortly before my arrival, H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) had died. So my professor for Christian ethics was James Gustafson (b. 1925), who later left Yale for the University of Chicago and Emory University. Meanwhile, just arrived from Chicago to teach church history was Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006), whose introductory course was more a multilingual,

not to say multicultural, annotated bibliography than the overview it was purported to be. Julian Hartt (1911-2010) taught his Barthian-based systematic theology. Paul Holmer (1916-2004) offered his fideistic reading of Søren Kierkegaard, and George Lindbeck (b. 1923), energized by Vatican II, was blending his Lutheran heritage with hard work on Thomas Aquinas. Interreligious discourse was not much in evidence. Some attention was paid to Judaism, but Islam and major Asian religions were scarcely in view.

I mention these points because they echo some of those in John Smith's "Experience, God, and Classical American Philosophy." At Yale Divinity School in the early 1960s, talking about religion in public was largely a matter of a Eurocentric, neo-orthodox Christian confessionalism in which, to use Smith's words, "all reality is to be understood in terms of the Christ-centered biblical faith without the interpolation of any philosophical concepts."[3] Some students and faculty—Sydney Ahlstrom (1919-1984), for example, and Randolph Miller (1910-2002)—were paying attention to more American traditions in philosophy and religious thought, but exposure to those ways of thinking was not easily obtainable for a first-year Divinity School student.

Yale Divinity School stands on a hill above and, at the time, some distance from the rest of Yale University. Its address is Prospect Street. Down that street in the early 1960s, the prospects in Yale's graduate department of philosophy were by no means entirely different. Arguably more Continental than British, more historically based than contemporary, more traditional than analytical, the curriculum there was highly Eurocentric, too. Graduate students focused on metaphysics and epistemology. They concentrated on great thinkers—Plato and Aristotle, Leibniz and Hegel—and on classical texts. Strangely, I do not recall seminars on Hume or Marx. There was very little in social philosophy or political theory and not much was offered in ethics, either. Stronger suits could be found in logic and in the history and philosophy of science. "Trendy" would not have been an adjective to describe Yale philosophy back then. Seminars on phenomenology, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein were about as chic as Yale could get during those times. Looking back at the mid-1960s, Yale provided solid philosophical training but in the light or darkness of what had happened in the world during the preceding twenty-five years and what would follow in the decades since that time, the educational experience that took place in Yale's graduate philosophy program was somewhat out of touch with history and the particularity of contemporary life, even if it was very much in touch with reality conceived metaphysically.

At least in my experience during the 1960s, however, two teacher-scholars in Yale's philosophy department were exceptions to the picture I have described—but only partly so. One was John Wild (1902-1972), who directed my doctoral dissertation on William James's moral philosophy. New to Yale in 1963, he had come there from Northwestern University at the urging, I believe, of John Smith. Wild's philosophical odyssey had taken him from Harvard and Spinoza to Northwestern and Husserl and then to Yale and William James. Specifically, Wild's reading in the tradition of existential phenomenology had led him to James's two-volume *Principles of Psychology*. In Wild's 1964-65 graduate seminar, we students read James's two volumes carefully from cover to cover, noting all the while his sensitivity for what phenomenologists like to call "lived experience." Only toward the end of the seminar did we even look at James's *Pragmatism*, and it was interpreted—correctly, I believe—as an outlook that flowed naturally from James's version of empiricism and his understanding of the stream of consciousness.

Wild's book, *The Radical Empiricism of William James* (1969), remains a primary source for showing James's affinities with, if not anticipations of, phenomenological perspectives and findings. Wild, it should be added, was not only an advocate of phenomenology as he understood it. His advocacy included convincing an American audience that phenomenology was not just another school of thought imported from Europe. In his wildest imagination, it was instead as American—that is to say, as empirical—as William James himself. Looking back on Wild's project, one can rightly say that the phenomenological fervor of the 1960s has not been sustained, but thanks in part to Wild's interpretation, interest in James is considerably stronger now than it was then. Personally, I shall always be immensely grateful to John Wild for introducing me to a thinker who quite literally changed my life and thought.

Earlier, I mentioned that there was a second Yale professor who also affected me in special ways. I first met John Smith in 1963, the year that Oxford University Press published one of the gems of American philosophical scholarship, his book called *The Spirit of American Philosophy*. During the entire 1963-64 academic year, I studied in Smith's graduate seminar. It was not, however, about Charles Peirce (1839-1914) or William James (1842-1910), Josiah Royce (1855-1916) or John Dewey (1859-1952). Instead we worked on Immanuel Kant.

That Kant seminar was memorable. Meeting after seminar meeting, John Smith would arrive, take out his pocket watch for time-keeping, and then in a voice accented by his native Brooklyn, with some German tossed in, he would explicate Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of*

Practical Reason. He did so with a pointed sense of humor—signs of it can be found in "Experience, God, and Classical American Philosophy"—that complemented his insightful brilliance. Not surprisingly, Smith's reading of Kant stressed "experience" and the conditions that make it possible. He made unforgettable the Kantian formula: "Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."[4]

After studying with John Smith for a year, it was hard to imagine that there had ever been or ever could be a philosopher more formidable than Kant. But Smith was no pure and simple Kantian. Better than I could have understood then, he read Kant with the classical American thinkers in mind. The relation worked the other way as well. The result was a truly distinctive interpretation of them all. At the time, however, the *Geist* of German thought was far more apparent to Yale graduate students than John Smith's spirit of American philosophy. We students had "knowledge about" the fact that Smith had written about Royce, James, and other classical American thinkers, but he did not give us "knowledge by acquaintance"—except though reading—because at Yale there was no regular graduate course in classical American philosophy during the years I spent there. How I wish it had been otherwise, but the streams of professional philosophical consciousness were not flowing that way at the time.

In some ways, undergraduate philosophy students at Yale during this period fared better than those in the Graduate School. During one of my years at Yale, for example, I was privileged to be a teaching assistant in a John Smith course on the philosophy of religion. Already in this 1965-66 course, Smith was working on views about experience and religious truth that would find full expression in his 1970 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary and subsequently in his 1973 book, *The Analogy of Experience*, about which there will be more to say later. In addition to Etienne Gilson's *God and Philosophy* and Paul Tillich's *Theology of Culture*, the reading list for Smith's philosophy of religion course included Alfred North Whitehead's *Religion in the Making* and John Dewey's *A Common Faith*. There was also a book newly edited by Smith himself. While it contained nothing by Peirce, James, or Royce, one could hear echoes of them, especially of Royce, in Smith's own contributions. Smith chose, for example, to end his philosophy of religion anthology with a paragraph from his 1961 book, *Reason and God*, which characteristically said:

> Religion becomes a stagnant, lifeless affair if all doubt and questing are removed from it. In the encounter with philosophy the meaning of faith as a continual incorporation and overcoming of doubt is revealed. Philosophy, in turn, becomes a sterile formalism when it takes itself to be no more than a way of attacking problems, a method for conducting an inquiry. The encounter with religion forces an acknowledgment of the certainties which all philosophies harbor in themselves, even if their proponents claim that they have no fixed conclusions and are merely humble seekers after truth. No philosopher has been able to avoid assumptions and no one has ever succeeded in doubting everything consistently. The encounter of philosophy with religion shows, in short, that religion cannot be all finding and that philosophy cannot be all seeking.[5]

At Yale in the mid-1960s, the teaching of philosophy and religious studies for undergraduates seemed to permit a discussion of texts and topics that were somehow less "correct" but perhaps more down-to-earth than those taken to be normative in the "professional" circles of graduate study. Decades later, too little has changed on that score, and philosophy and theology are not the better for it.

Undergraduate teaching is not quite the same as talking in public, but it comes close to that approach. In the undergraduate classroom and in the public forum, if ideas are not clear, if problems are not real in a sense that others can feel and see, if questions are not about experiences whose importance rivets attention—then the audience is likely to be lost. Not much will be communicated; even less will be learned. James, Royce, and Dewey did much of their philosophy in public. Had there been more opportunity for Peirce, he would have done so, too. James spoke to public audiences as well as to university classes and seminars. So did Royce and Dewey. Of course, they needed quiet time to think and write. They needed the criticism that only a community of inquiring peers could provide. But the spirit of their work involved them in public discourse. In that arena, having something intelligible and relevant to say was important. Otherwise, audiences would be unlikely to appear, let alone to return. Having something to say that was not only intelligible and relevant but even gripping and moving was important, too. Otherwise, audiences would be unlikely to listen and discuss, even if they chose to appear and return.

During the mid-1960s, Yale did have a special public observance of the fiftieth anniversary of Charles Peirce's death. Those lectures drew good-sized audiences. People came, listened, returned, discussed. Richard Bernstein (b. 1932) edited the proceedings, and they were published. But I do not recall that there was a course on Peirce to follow up. Even Bernstein's graduate teaching—before Yale foolishly saw fit to dismiss him—focused as much on Wittgenstein as on any American themes and

thinkers. During this period there was a seminar on Whitehead. Taught by the logician Frederick Fitch (1908-1987), it was strong in the exploration of Whitehead's philosophical system but did relatively little to situate Whitehead historically. Paul Weiss (1901-2002) was doing his work, too, but as always, it was very much *his* work, and hence any insights that the classical American thinkers may have contributed got subsumed in Weiss's own system. Still, if the classical American tradition did not get talked about much in public at Yale in the 1960s, it was not for a lack of talented interpreters nor even for the lack of a public—student and otherwise—that would have been interested. The winds of professional philosophy, however, were blowing in other directions. Fortunately, those currents would change, and even then there were enough of them in the air so that students such as I could find their way into the classical American tradition. When they did so at Yale, John Smith was always ready to lead and eager to help. That was always the case throughout his long and distinguished career.

In the 1960s, as Smith's "Experience, God, and Classical American Philosophy" indicates, "God talk" came under attack by positivistic and analytic philosophy. In ways sometimes related, sometimes different, it was also under attack by thinkers who advanced what was then called "radical" or "death of God" theology. Since my interests overlapped the fields of philosophy and religious studies, I read widely in the "attack literature" of the times. Of all the books I encountered in that study, one far and away affected me more than the others. Its author was somewhat surprised to be associated with writers such as William Hamilton (b. 1924), Thomas Altizer (b. 1927), Paul van Buren (1924-1998), and others who found cause for Christian celebration in the Nietzschean liberation that they thought God's "death" promised. From the Jewish perspective of Richard Rubenstein (b. 1924), however, that outlook was shallow. If the idea of a God of history was dead, as Rubenstein argued in his classic-to-be, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, that outcome was no cause for celebration, coming as it did in the wake of the Holocaust, Nazi Germany's genocidal onslaught against the Jews.[6]

Rubenstein's philosophical resources came more from Hegel and Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Max Weber, than from Peirce and James or Royce and Dewey. Nevertheless, his thinking had a pragmatic outlook, and it involved struggles with evil that made possible connections to themes in James and Royce that had attracted me. What did beliefs mean in practice? What were the practical consequences of holding them? How, if at all, could one make sense of a place called Auschwitz, and how should the signs of its time be interpreted? Those pragmatic concerns were

among Rubenstein's governing questions. Thus, he helped to start me on a journey that would have unexpected turns. Those turns were not "linguistic" or "pragmatic," as some once-fashionable philosophical rhetoric might say. They were more historical and existential than that.

Earlier, my reading of James had taken me to Royce and others in the classical American tradition. Some time later, I found that my reading of Richard Rubenstein took me elsewhere, too. One of the new encounters was with Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz and the 1986 Nobel laureate for peace. Before the Holocaust devastated his family's life, Wiesel had a teacher named Moishe who meant a great deal to him. Nearly all of their talk was about religion, and on one occasion Wiesel asked his teacher, "Why do you pray?" Moishe replied, "I pray to the God within me for the strength to ask Him the real questions."[7] Driven by his Holocaust experience, Wiesel's persistent seeking and finding show that he learned his teacher's lesson well.

My sustained reading of Wiesel began in July 1972, about the time that my second child was born. My wife, Lyn, and I named her Sarah. In more ways than one, my entry into Sarah's world coincided with my entry into Elie Wiesel's. For in the latter I would meet another Sarah, one who led Wiesel to say, "Whoever listens to Sarah and doesn't change, whoever enters Sarah's world and doesn't invent new gods and new religions, deserves death and destruction."[8]

What made Wiesel write such words about "Sarah's world" is described in a novel called *The Accident*, one of the more than forty books that Wiesel has published. Individually and collectively all of them have moved me.[9] *The Accident* can show why. Partly autobiographical, it details episodes in the life of a Holocaust survivor named Eliezer. In some of them, Sarah is present. Although she is the namesake of the Jewish people's mother, Sarah knows that too much has happened between that people's biblical genesis and their post-Holocaust survival. In *The Accident*, Sarah's world is that of a Paris prostitute. As Eliezer relives his encounter with her, however, he and Sarah are taken back to an earlier time and place. Thus, it becomes clear that the foundation of Sarah's world is a question: "Did you ever sleep with a twelve-year-old woman?"[10]

That question was asked and answered with a vengeance in special barracks that could be found in some Nazi concentration camps. The despair of Sarah's world intensifies that of Eliezer's even more when Sarah discloses that her purity as a victim is forever compromised. Sometimes, Sarah recalls, she felt pleasure in those barracks and probably survived because of it.

A collision resulted from my encounters with Elie Wiesel and his writings. How, for example, could my joy as Sarah's father fit with the devastation of the Holocaust and, in particular, the despair of "Sarah's world" as Wiesel portrayed it in that early novel? What did such collisions with the Holocaust mean for philosophy and theology, for my own teaching and writing in those areas? What changes would be required in my study and research, in my own living day to day—including my Christian identity—to probe such depths? What I experienced still reminds me of some of the features that James associated with *conversion* in the prolonged attention he gave to that subject in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. At one point, for instance, James wrote:

> Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one's center of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so. We have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought peals through us for the first time, or the act has suddenly turned into a moral impossibility. All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to re-crystallize about it.[11]

Just before making that statement in his Gifford Lectures, James remarked that the language he was using to talk about religion in public might not be rigorously exact. Not to worry, James added, his language would be "exact enough, if you recognize from your own experience the facts which I seek to designate by it."[12] I could do so. The Holocaust and the questions it keeps raising had become hot and live ones for me. Things had to be reoriented—or disoriented—by it. The proliferation of genocide and other mass atrocity crimes after the Holocaust has intensified that conviction for me.

Something else that James said in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* helped me to understand that this conversion—it turned out to be partly philosophical, partly religious, and partly existential—was something to be welcomed. In what may be the most helpful words that James wrote in that book, he said, "No two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical solutions. Each, from his peculiar angle of observation, takes in a certain sphere of fact and trouble, which each must deal with in a unique manner."[13]

As Rubenstein, Wiesel, and others led me deeper into study of the Holocaust and other genocides, I became convinced that the particularity of actual experience, not the experience in general or the counter-factual

imaginings of which philosophers are so fond, and the centrality of historical detail, not the generalities of philosophies or theologies of history, deserved to loom larger and larger. An empiricism akin to but perhaps at times even more radical than that of James and the classical American philosophers was needed. It needed to address not just categories such as perception and conception; it would not be enough to settle for phenomenological descriptions that presumed understanding would follow if only we learned to look properly. There were instead in the concrete specificity of lived experience elements so disrupting of the conventional, so disharmonious with common assumptions about understanding and interpretation, that one had to confront and ponder them very carefully to avoid foolish philosophy and trivial religion.

To illustrate what I mean, a major symposium in April 1991 honored one of the University of Vermont's retiring faculty members. It paid tribute to an extraordinary professor of political science. His research—including especially a monumental book called *The Destruction of the European Jews*—arguably made Raul Hilberg (1926-2007) the world's preeminent Holocaust scholar at that time. Among the many distinguished persons who honored Hilberg was the brilliant and unrelenting filmmaker, Claude Lanzmann (b. 1925), whose epic *Shoah* became a cinematic counterpart to Hilberg's scholarship on the Holocaust. Hilberg played an important part in Lanzmann's film. In a segment on the Warsaw ghetto, for example, he discussed the dilemmas faced by Adam Czerniaków (1880-1942), the man who headed the Jewish Council in that place. Czerniaków documented those dilemmas in the diary he kept until he took his own life on July 23, 1942, the day after the Germans began to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto by deporting its Jewish population to Treblinka. Hilberg knew the details of Czerniaków's life because he helped to translate and edit the Czerniaków diary, which survived the "Final Solution."

In another segment of Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Hilberg studied a different kind of document: *Fahrplananordnung 587*. This railroad timetable scheduled death traffic. Conservative estimates indicate that *Fahrplananordnung 587*, which outlined a few days in late September 1942, engineered some ten thousand Jews to Treblinka's gas chambers.

Raul Hilberg spent his life detailing how such things happened. Hence, in his first appearance in the Lanzmann film, he observed that

> In all my work, I have never begun by asking the big questions, because I was always afraid that I would come up with small answers; and I have preferred to address these things which are minutiae or details in order that I might then be able to put together in a gestalt a picture which, if not an

> explanation, is at least a description, a more full description, of what transpired.[14]

Hilberg's opening statement in *Shoah* warns about "big questions," the kind philosophers and theologians frequently love to ask.[15] He did not deny that the Holocaust raises them—first and foremost "Why?" Contrary to much human expectation, however, the fact that a question can be asked does not mean that it can be answered well, if at all, particularly when the questions are "big." So Hilberg concentrated on details instead. Those minutiae, however, were much more than minutiae. Their particularity continues to speak volumes and forms a terribly vast description. So full of life distorted and wasted, its accumulated detail makes the "big" questions less easy and simple to raise, let alone answer, but all the more important, too.

Put into perspective by work like Hilberg's, the "big questions" become what Elie Wiesel's teacher, Moishe, called the "real questions." Such questions command a respect that they deserve. That respect enjoins suspicion about "answers" that are small—inadequate for the facts they encompass. That same respect also focuses awareness that the big questions raised by history's particularity nonetheless need to be kept alive. For the political scientist's detail and the historian's minutiae, far from silencing the big questions, ought to intensify wonder about them. Otherwise, we repress feeling too much and deny ourselves insights that can only be deepened by asking the "real questions."

Note that *insight* and *answer*, at least as used here, are not identical terms. For the fact that a question does not lead to an answer, as the word "answer" is conventionally understood, does not mean that the question is not real and right. To the contrary, especially when they are grounded in and provoked by work like Hilberg's, questions are often as real and right as they are "big" just because they do not have conventional answers but instead produce awareness and understanding that can come in no other way than through inquiry and reflection, meditation and musing about them.

The French thinker Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003) wrestled with such points in a Holocaust-related book called *The Writing of the Disaster*. Sometimes, he said,

> There is a question and yet no doubt; there is a question, but no desire for an answer; there is a question, and nothing that can be said, but just this nothing, to say." To that dark saying, he added that "the question concerning the disaster is part of the disaster: it is not an interrogation, but a prayer, an entreaty, a call for help. The disaster appeals to the disaster