

Coming of age through intro philosophy

By Richard T. Elmore
Fifty-five "older adults" attentively listened. This group of students, ranging in age from 57 to 82, was a class in philosophy. Each person many years before had come of age—physically and legally. Hopefully, as the result of the enthusiastic and helpful guidance of Dr. John Lincourt of UNCC, they had another 15 weeks of guidance every Tuesday for two hours; becoming of age in philosophy.

Coming of Age in Philosophy is a book comprised of selective writings of philosophers from the earliest age such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, to the more modern philosophers such as Descartes, Hume, Marx and James and Whitehead. The outstanding book by James K. Fieldman entitled *Understanding Philosophy* was used as parallel reading which helped the students to understand this profound subject.

A record of attendance of this class showed full attendance each session. We looked forward to the next meeting and the scholarly presentation by our young instructor.

Philosophy requires deep thinking. We learned that philosophers, throughout the ages, have undertaken a big job and they will be a long time in completing

it. Whenever progress was made and problems solved a new area of ignorance opened up at the same time. It is basic to know what is philosophy. Yes, that goal is difficult. We soon learned one is either a determinist or a follower of the theory of freedom of the will. The first believes that man's thought and actions are, without exception, the necessary effect of a priori causes. The second says a thing is either true or false without exceptions.

Our class soon learned that religious concepts could not be used in solving or understanding principles of philosophy. There is a vast difference between the finite and the infinite. However shocked we were at first, our minds were set at rest when we learned we were dealing with reason which governs philosophy. We knew God is a belief. Although we could not touch Him, we could believe in Him. In this respect, Kant helped us because he said we need Him. Therefore, we must think of Him as existing. Kant argued we must have God to satisfy our moral and esthetic needs.

Philosophy to us became very profound. My former personal belief that everything, however difficult, can be reduced to a simple premise was shattered. This



became increasingly imminent as we attempted to probe the depths of philosophy. It was difficult for us to correlate the different philosophies, or the elaboration of them, throughout time since the Golden Age of Greece. This age produced three major philosophers; Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; whose influence has ever since been felt. It is interesting to observe Plato was a pupil of Socrates and Aristotle was a pupil of Plato. Socr-

ates did not write but his teachings are recorded by his pupil, Plato.

Philosophy for Socrates was the quest for wisdom. To be wise meant to be good. It is an ethical concern the force and depth of which is immense.

Philosophy is a difficult subject which uses ordinary words in a queer way that have no practical application whatsoever. It has been stated, authoritatively, philosophy is a science without supposition. It

is a system of truths which have been constructed without admitting as groundwork any truth that is given as proven outside of the system. It is known philosophy is the working tool of inquisitive men. It seems simple answers often leave complex questions behind them. Many approaches are used. Locke used appearance and reality. It seems we just go on and on in our endeavor to reach a final conclusion if we can. We often wonder where the end is. In the final analysis in philosophy, we have to put it all together with emphasis on the word *all*.

Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." The influence of Descartes has been almost out of proportion to the amount of his writings. But he opened the door and his successors poured through. He gave them a chance. They could investigate mind or they could investigate matter. The philosophers seized on mind as their special province. Descartes separated mind from matter. For instance, Plato developed the philosophy of ideas, using mind. Kant's whole theory of knowledge is as much a contribution as, say, Plato's theory of the idea. Kant's whole theory is based on experience but no one ever experiences Kant's *experience* anymore than they experience Plato's theory of the *ideas*. Thus it is understood why philosophy is so nebulous.

Kant was the chief of the thinkers who took

the road in the eighteenth century. One key to Kant is he saw *all* of it as being his own experience. The universal ideas which were not products of experience could be linked to it by calling them a priori, because they came before experience. The rest was a posteriori, or with experience. That put everything, both the abstract idea which we have and the sense data which we encounter in direct relation to experience. One philosopher who relied upon sense experience alone for reliable knowledge of reality was David Hume. The first thing he doubted was philosophy itself as it had usually been presented. He was a convinced skeptic and a hard man to prove wrong. Empiricism is the fancy word for sense experience—the only source of knowledge.

To digress from the 18th century to the age of the early great philosophers, 600 BC-400 BC, it is important to note Socrates' motto to us was "The unexamined life is not worth living," and he invites all and sundry to examine life with him. He recognized only one good: knowledge, and only one evil: ignorance. Thus Plato held the highest form of human life is the intellectual contemplation of ideas. Stated differently, Plato was an idealist. Aristotle, contrary to his teacher, Plato, was a realist and set up his own school apart from Plato.

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