NECESSITY AND DIFFICULTY OF BEGINNING WELL IN PHILOSOPHY

Statement of the necessity

Nothing is more necessary in philosophy than to begin well. If philosophy can be in some way without beginning well, it cannot be good philosophy.

Reason for the necessity

The reason for this is that everything else depends upon the beginning. The beginning, although small in size, is great in its power or in that to which its power extends. Hence, it is often compared to a seed which is small in comparison to what comes from it. From a small acorn comes a great oak-tree.

Three corollaries of the reason

There are, at least, three corollaries or statements that follow from the above reason.

The first corollary is that one will be helped through the whole of philosophy by beginning well. Hence, the Greek proverb said that *the beginning is half of all.* And Plato and Aristotle said it seems to be even more than half. Heisenberg has pointed out that even a beginning in the sense of asking the right question is often to go more than halfway to a knowledge of the truth.

The second corollary is that one will be harmed or impeded through the whole of philosophy if one has not begun well.

The third corollary is that even a small mistake in the beginning, or about the beginning, is a great one in the end. This is because that mistake will be multiplied through all that to which the power of the beginning extends. Hence,

a mistake in the beginning is likened to taking the wrong road at a fork in the road. The further one goes, the further one is from where one should be.

Statement of the difficulty

Nothing is more difficult in philosophy than to begin well.

Reasons for the difficulty of beginning well

The first reason why it is difficult to begin well is that a beginning is small in size and therefore it is hard to be seen.

The second reason is that, even if a beginning is somewhat seen, it is difficult to see it *as a beginning*. For one cannot know a beginning as a beginning without seeing of what it is the beginning. And one cannot begin to see of what it is the beginning before one has followed it well for a long time. Thus, it is difficult to comprehend the power of a beginning. And if one does not begin to comprehend its power, one will not consider it seriously, or sufficiently, enough.

The third reason why it is difficult to begin well is that even a small mistake or defect in the beginning is very serious. And such a mistake or defect is hard to avoid given the smallness of the beginning itself.

Since there are many beginnings of philosophy (some in desire and some in our knowledge) and the first (both in our desire and in our knowledge) are natural, one should not perhaps speak without distinction of the difficulty of beginning well. Someone might with reason say that the natural beginnings are not as difficult as those which must be acquired by custom or by the use of reason. (Aristotle would seem to be speaking in the book *About Sophistical Refutations* of one kind of beginning in our knowledge when emphasizing the difficulty of the beginning in reasoned out knowledge.) While granting the justness of this distinction, it is important to understand that to begin well in philosophy requires that *all* beginnings be good. For the bad comes from any defect. Hence, the distinction of the beginnings of philosophy increases our appreciation of the difficulty of beginning well. Moreover, although some

beginnings seem to be more or less assured by nature, even there we can see difficulties, as for example, in the axioms about being and non-being.

Four corollaries or consequences from seeing the difficulty

The first corollary is that one must be very careful to distinguish the beginnings from each other and from what is not a beginning.

The second corollary is that one must consider how each beginning is to be acquired and determined in us.

The third corollary is that we must follow the advice of Friar Laurence to Romeo most of all when considering or acquiring the beginnings. That advice is: *Wisely and slow: they stumble that run fast*. Hence, as Edgar Allen Poe well said, great minds are always most hesitant in the beginning. Thus, it is not so surprising after all that the greatest mind of the middle ages, if not of all time, Thomas Aquinas, should have been called in his student days, *The Dumb Ox.* Likewise, Gamow writes of how Bohr was always the last man to get a new idea in the seminars at Copenhagen, but the first one to get it right.

The fourth corollary is that one should always return from time to time to a consideration of the beginnings. One should never assume that one has acquired the beginnings well enough for all one's subsequent thinking in philosophy.

Duane H Berquist