

#### *46. Letter to the Chair of the Department (1994)*

“Before you have received this letter, you no doubt will have been informed of an incident that occurred in Professor Joós’s class on Tuesday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of October. It consisted of a student approaching Professor Joós in a seemingly threatening way. Being the student in question, I wish nothing more than to tell you the truth of the matter.

“I will begin with the events leading up to this incident. When I first enrolled in Professor Joós’s graduate-level courses (i.e., PHIL. 672G Metaphysics and PHIL. 668W Hermeneutics), we got along quite well. I took him to be a very learned man and I think he saw in me a serious and conscientious student. I attended his classes faithfully for a month and, during this time, I became increasingly aware of how traditional and entrenched his views are. At first this didn’t bother me because, on the whole, he seemed to be open and receptive. And even my initial reaction to his books, so different from what it was to be later, was positive. Such being the case, you may well ask: what went wrong? How could such a promising start turn out to be so disastrous?

“Perhaps I am one who likes to pick a quarrel. I don’t believe that I do so, however, indiscriminately. It was only by degrees that I came to the realization that Professor Joós, both in his books and in his classroom lectures, displays an uncanny ability to evade difficult questions. Principally those that challenge the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions upon which his own theorizing is based. It is this theorizing which underlies one of his books (i.e., the text for PHIL. 668W Hermeneutics) and which dominates in another (i.e., the text for PHIL. 672G Metaphysics). It is this theorizing that, moreover, he promotes as a sort of renewed and revitalized first philosophy to which all other philosophical thinking must incline.

“His interpretation of Heidegger is a case in point. He refuses to acknowledge what many or most scholars do, namely, that Heidegger sets out to surpass Aristotelian metaphysics. Instead he argues that Heidegger is fundamentally in accord with it. Now of course it is certainly not my position that he should neither have this interpretation nor teach it in class. What I object to is his not being willing to suffer any serious questioning of it.

“By the middle of October I had become quite unhappy with, in particular, the metaphysics course. It was in this one that, along with the numerous anecdotes Professor Joós tells in class, there was an ongoing reiteration of Aristotelian metaphysics. It was these sessions that, with respect to the latter, resembled a sort of catechism and glorified rote-learning that increasingly distressed me. I finally went to Professor Joós one afternoon and, since I didn’t have any clear idea how to address him on the

pedagogical issue, I ended up raising the one of his interpretation of Heidegger. Things got out of hand when, instead of responding directly to questions that I had written down and submitted to him in advance, he began reading and translating out loud passages from *Sein und Zeit*. The upshot was that I lost patience and accused him of being evasive. He in turn accused me of coming to him in bad faith. When I criticized one of his books for being repetitious, he told me it was beyond my understanding. I then accused him of dogmatism. This hostile exchange, although it came to an end before we parted, was sufficient to make our leave-taking less than cordial.

“Shortly after this, I wrote a letter telling him as politely as I could that, while wishing to continue with his courses (I perhaps should remind you that to abandon them at this point would have been a major setback to my studies), I no longer wished to attend his classes. I also told him that, as final assignments for these courses, I was willing to submit essays that would critique his two books, *Intentionality: Source of Intelligibility* and *Poetic Truth and Transvaluation in Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*. Of course this last proposal was unusual and perhaps even provocative. Nevertheless I felt it necessary to back up my claim that his work was repetitious and dogmatic.

“Professor Clarke, Director of Graduate Studies, can attest to Professor Joós’s not responding to me directly. Instead he informed the graduate director that I must continue to attend his classes. Indeed, he went on to say – and this struck me as both ridiculous and insulting – that, if I missed these classes, I wouldn’t be able to pass his courses. I wrote a second letter asking him to reconsider. It too failed to prompt the sort of response that, even if it weren’t the granting of my request, would have shown me a modicum of respect.

“All of the above leads to the incident that occurred on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October. On that day I approached Professor Joós before class to try to persuade him once again that it wouldn’t benefit either one of us to have me there. However, this move didn’t fare any better than the others. No, in fact, all it did was engender one more gesture of magisterial contempt and dismissal. Trying not so much to contain my anger as to find an effective way to give vent to it, I then turned towards his students who were all seated and patiently waiting for the class to start. I began informing them about the matter and showing in no uncertain terms how the conflict between us was even then spilling over into the classroom. Some of the students were amused but others were angry. I eventually sat down and Professor Joós

took over.

“Although I was still upset, I was sufficiently in control of myself to forego any further theatrics and constrain myself to asking Professor Joós a few questions. These came up as he carried on with the class and bore directly on the subject matter. Nonetheless they proved to be sufficiently provocative that he lost his patience and came out with the comment: *‘You can teach intelligent students but you can’t teach them to be intelligent.’* At this point I rose to my feet and started towards him. My intention was to produce a certificate for scholarly excellence that I had just received and happened to have with me. (Perhaps you are aware of my receiving the Maria-Teresa Hausmann Award at the recent fall ceremony.) However, one or two of the students, fearing the worst, ran out of the class and informed the security. A great commotion then ensued. The classroom was cleared out and Professor Joós and I were asked to sit down and write reports.

“I must of course be held responsible for my actions. I long ago realized there was something antagonistic in my attitude towards Academia. I want to be entirely my own man and this can easily be at odds with institutional practises. So far I have been lucky and had professors who gave me a certain latitude. Perhaps this luck is now at an end.

“With respect to my disrupting the class and inconveniencing others, I realize I made a mistake. I overstepped my rights and infringed upon those of others. I held to an ideal of allowing full play for informed dissent. Unfortunately, I didn’t properly take into consideration other principles. It is only to this charge I plead guilty and reject any other that may be laid against me.”

– *A veritable menace! How old was the professor?*

– *Seventy. But he stood his ground. He wasn’t afraid. It was only the students who lost their heads.*

– *Your hero lost his head, Alice.*

– *Only his temper. He was insulted and he had good reason to stand up and show his indignation.*

– *I’ve never witnessed anything like that in my thirty years of teaching.*

– *Professor Joós said he’d never had in forty.*

*– What was the upshot of all this?*

*– Well, a lot of things but when it comes right down to it, stubbornness on both sides.*

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