

THE TEACHING TREE

Sunnie D. Kidd

Let us, if you please, open with a quotation from Martin Heidegger:

It is absolutely correct and proper to say that “You can’t do anything with philosophy.” It is only wrong to suppose that this is the last word on philosophy. For the rejoinder imposes itself: granted that *we* cannot do anything with philosophy, might not philosophy, if we concern ourselves with it, do something *with us*?¹

Utilizing the simplicity of a tree to teach teachers philosophy can answer Heidegger’s question. What we call “The Teaching Tree” continues to give nourishment from the ground of metaphysics. The root of the tree sends its resilient gift of life into the trunk and its branches. The root branches out in the soil supporting growth out of the ground which gives forth that which is to leave.

Philosophy, says Heidegger,² does not concentrate on its ground, it leaves its ground by metaphysics yet never escapes its ground. This presentation is an attempt to go beyond even the root of the tree to the ground which supports the root. The ground, as a root metaphor, which does not need support, is that upon which everything else rests.

When considering the ground upon all of which is found going into the ground trees co-mingle. Trees are in relation. The word tree is not empty but displays something about the essence “tree.” In this way one can identify specific trees as trees. If one looks at a pine tree growing in the valley it is different from one on the mountain.

In the German language the word “spruce” is masculine and the word “palm” is feminine. In the French language “sapin” and “palmier” are masculine. Entering with one’s experience of a tree, it is for the experiencer experiencing that which is experienced. This is upon the ground; experience is experience of something.

Considering four approaches to philosophy such as idealism, realism, pragmatism and existentialism in relation to a tree, one might say:

Idealism: A tree is an ultimate idea.

Realism: A tree is a tree.

Pragmatism: A tree is what I take it to be.

Existentialism: A tree exists for me.

For idealism, the physical aspect of a tree is merely a reflection of the ultimate (idea) reality. The essence of tree-ness does not exist in the physical reality. The physical exists but is not ultimately real.

For realism, when walking through a forest one might see trees as pines, oaks, elms and maples. Trees vary in some aspects and all are similar as members of a class. As trees, they share in the form of tree-ness. There is the general category (botanical reality) and the particular trees that are members of the class.

For pragmatism, “that” is a tree. The “that,” the look of the tree, its overthereness, the feel and sound of the wind against it, is the occurrence in perception and action which is experience. The tree of experience is the tree apprehended. Experience discloses and is given. Feelings are the beginning thoughts of the developed tree.

For existentialism, the existence of the tree is real. It is intensely singular and limited by death. There is only time to consider the significance of its own existence before the conclusion. For the existentialist, existence precedes essence. For the existential phenomenologist, essence precedes existence. The choices are: for the existentialist this is what it is; for the existential phenomenologist, being is but cannot be from itself.

As a mini-assignment, one can ask each person to take up an example of the nature of a tree displaying these four approaches: idealism, realism, pragmatism, existentialism. Each person presents this work before the class.

What happens is that each person has to stand for that which is presented. We have found that when each takes up this assignment in a personal way, the presentations are owned. Those of artistic incline present that; those of the word, that. When each teacher sees that this work can be utilized in other situations, especially in one’s own teaching, effort is put forth.

From our own experience we find that although we are existential phenomenologists, in teaching, all four approaches are present to some degree. Going into the ground, trees co-mingle yet we reside within one approach more than others.

It seems appropriate to give two examples of the nature of a tree displaying these four approaches. The first one was written by Sunnie D. Kidd:

The Nature of a Tree

Well I have been living upon this ground all of my life. You know it is true, if you stay in one spot long enough, everyone passes by.

Now called Lone Mountain, this terrain has a long history. Indians are buried here, now a university has been built and it is a good spot to observe human nature. I've tagged them, observed their comings, goings, changes, arrivals of the new ones, re-visits by the old ones. The white tags are for idealists, blue for realists, red for pragmatists and what else, of course, black for existentialists.

Time for class changes. Here comes that cloud-headed boy and his girlfriend. Uh oh, they are heading this way, white tags flying like flags and he's got his knife out. Oh no, not another pair of intertwining hearts with names. They see only what is ideal, what is perfect and all else fades in the glory that fills their eyes. Their feet need not touch this ground, they live in castles in the air. This too will change.

Here comes old blue tag, let me take a look at the year. I don't believe it, 1913! This guy's got tags of every color on him, right now though the blue ones outnumber the rest in his vast experience. He's been everywhere judging from his array of colors. How about that, he's a botanist taking a closer look at the surroundings. There's the acacia tree, profusely yellow blossoms bursting into the air, a real pollen polluter, a hay fever haven. There's the plum down the street, the palm and the guy's checking out the condition of the Monterey pine. Hey, he's no botanist, here comes the guy with a saw!

Another 80 years have passed. White tags, blue tags have come and gone, the red tag days are here. This time we have architects surveying the land. Lawns have been planted and groomed, Walter the chief gardener has his red tag flapping in the breeze. He knows every twig like a book, each blade of grass for him is a new day. He runs around on the Hester wagon with his tools, trimming here, looking there, re-working the terrain and making use of each available spot to achieve an overall result. After a few years with Walter around, nothing looks the same, everything is trimmed and cultivated and the shrubs have haircuts. He bonsai's them into what may at first seem an unnatural form. But actually, upon closer inspection, it grows according to its own expression and his trimming follows that flow.

Geez, here comes the impossible dream. These black tags get me most of all. This one coming along must've had his head stuck between the pages of Sartre too long. He's in that deep dark abyss; doesn't know where he came from, has no idea what waits for him, has to find out who he is, always asking "what is the meaning of life?" and has figured out he's gonna die.

He's looking in life to discover his ground of being. We come, we go, we are. So what? Who cares? If I could pull up my roots and walk, I'd be outta here.

The example that follows was written by Dan West, who participated in a philosophy class:

The Nature of a Tree

Highway maintenance workers have stopped traffic so the road can be repaired. While the flagman impatiently awaits his orders to send traffic on, traffic backs up. Four vehicles wait and patiently their occupants pass the time by looking out the window at a stately redwood tree.

Car #1: In a battered Volkswagen with a dented fender sits an idealist. The driver, an artist, stares at the tree. The artist's mind is lost in the beauty and spirit of the tree. Wishing she could capture its beauty on canvas but is sadly aware of the impossibility of creating what only the mind is able to see and feel. This beauty will be known only to her through her mental images.

Car #2: In the back of a grey Chevy station wagon is a ten year old realist staring out the window. The boy sees the tree and wishes he could spend the next twenty minutes exploring it. He sees the tall straight trunk and long gently curving branches. He sees the rough bark and bright green color of its needles. He's sure that if given the opportunity he would smell the fragrant odor of the tree and feel the tree's texture as he escaped the boredom of the back seat.

Car #3: In the third vehicle, an old pickup truck, sits a pragmatist. He stares at the tree and sees the tree only in terms of its value. He sees the lumber it would produce, the boats its lumber could build and the money he could make.

Car #4: In the last car, in the shade of the tree, a blue sedan waits. The driver, an existentialist, sits and enjoys the shade of the tree. She realizes that the comfort enjoyed by her is fleeting. She wonders how others have enjoyed the tree. She wonders how the tree has changed and wonders of its future. For the existentialist is but one traveler of the many who enjoyed the tree.

Soon the flagman is given the order to allow traffic to proceed. As he waves the traffic onward, the tree stands tall and unbending to his wishes.

Notes:

- 1) Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 12.
- 2) Martin Heidegger, "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics", *Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed., intro., preface Walter Kaufmann (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1956), p. 208.