

Philosophy and the City

Classic to Contemporary Writings

Edited by
Sharon M. Meagher

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

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Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Diane Ganeles
Marketing by Fran Keneston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Philosophy and the city : classic to contemporary writings / edited by
Sharon M. Meagher.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7914-7307-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-7914-7308-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Cities and towns—Philosophy.
2. Urbanization—Philosophy.
3. Sociology, Urban—Philosophy.

I. Meagher, Sharon M.

HT113.P46 2008
307.7601—dc22

2007013090

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

and practice ought to be a routine aspect of the philosopher's contributions to city life. The philosopher is neither an infallible guru nor a substitute social scientist. The intellectual contribution that the philosopher can make to the contemporary city lies in the direction of providing a wider understanding of what is possible within the real constraints of the urban environment. In short, the philosopher ought to become a master of contrast as a way of providing effective modes of thinking about divisive issues.

But there is more to the philosopher's responsibility than abstract intellectual effort. The contrast offered must also be "heartfelt." I employ this term (and I am aware of how sentimental the term may sound, especially to cynical ears) in order to express the connection between thought and feeling that has been so much a part of my argument. In so doing I once again consciously place myself within the tradition of American naturalism and pragmatism. Surely, when William James inveighed against vicious intellectualism, he was protesting against a form of thinking that tore the heart out of human experience. And a great part of Charles Peirce's labor to develop his semiotics of firstness, secondness, and thirdness was given over to ensuring a central place for feelings within philosophical reflection. Likewise, Dewey's insistence on the "had" quality of experience was meant to remind us that feeling is a more primary and concrete category than sensing and thinking. And there is also Whitehead's doctrine of prehensions, a bold systematic effort to refuse any ultimate distinction between thought and feeling. Heart and mind go together within the spirit of American philosophy.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. What does Grange think that the contemporary philosopher can offer the city?
2. What does Grange mean by saying that the philosopher is "the master of heartfelt contrast"?
3. Why is that quality of the philosopher important to the city?
4. What, in addition to intellectual effort, should the philosopher commit to the city?

From: *Philosophy and The City*, ed. Sharon
Meagher (New York: SUNY Press)
2008

James Conlon

James Conlon is Professor of Philosophy at Mount Mary College in Wisconsin. Conlon publishes and teaches on philosophical issues and their relationship to other disciplines and to the contemporary world. He has written about art, film, love, and cities. In this essay, Conlon argues that cities are the best type of places to do philosophy because cities act like "gadflies," shaking us out of our complacency and demanding that we engage in thoughtful questioning. Conlon defines cities as places that are fundamentally diverse, places that bring us into erotic relation with the Other. Following Plato, Conlon argues that such eros is the activity of philosophy. Conlon draws both on the image of Socrates as gadfly as well as on Plato's concept of eros. This essay explicitly links philosophy and the city and lends comparisons to Dewey, Lefebvre, Grange, and Gavin. See also Iris Marion Young, whom Conlon cites.

"CITIES AND THE PLACE OF PHILOSOPHY" (1999)

I want to argue the importance of urban places to philosophy. Being urban and being philosophical are significantly intertwined and the city is the surest place for philosophy to happen. This is so not just because philosophy, understood as the thoughtful questioning of conventional beliefs about human meaning, originated in the city, but because the dynamics of city life parallel and enable the life of philosophy. Admittedly, philosophy can, and sometimes does, happen outside the city. Admittedly, nature can, and sometimes does, offer the conceptual challenges necessary for great philosophy. But it is urban life that relentlessly raises the most disturbing questions. While the city is not the only place for philosophy, it is, I will argue, the place most supportive of it.

WHAT IS A CITY?

The obvious place to begin my argument is with a workable definition of a city. For most people, the city's defining element would likely have something to do with size. But if size were the only factor, some of history's most significant cities would not be labeled as such. By present standards, for example, the ancient Greek *polis* tended to be rather small. This is indicated by Aristotle's insistence that the citizenry of a *polis* not exceed a number that would allow for mutual recognition.¹ But the

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 262 (1362b7-22).

Greek *polis* is so foundational to our understanding of what a city is, that any definition which excluded Athens or Sparta would be inherently flawed. The essence of the city must be found in something other than mere size.

The sociologist, Louis Wirth, acknowledges this in his commonly used definition of the city as "a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals."² The value of Wirth's definition is that it understands the city more as a socio-cultural entity than a geographic one. Like the human being whom it mirrors, the city has a "body"—its physical size, shape and structure; but these geographical factors are not its defining essence, not its soul. The soul of a city lies in its heterogeneity.

A city is, fundamentally and essentially, diverse. Unlike a village, it is inhabited by people with radically different beliefs and values.³ A city's size is a factor only because size usually affects the extent and manner of its heterogeneity. Contrary to Aristotle, at the heart of the city is not an encounter with the familiar, but a continual and inevitable encounter with the foreign.

Once the defining role of heterogeneity is understood, it becomes easier to see why the city has played such a pivotal role in human history. [...]

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CITIES

In *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford has speculated that cities originated partly as vehicles for preserving and transmitting the accumulated accomplishments of a culture. As the knowledge, achievements and mythology of a people began to transcend the limits of individual memory, some method for storage became necessary. "The invention of such forms as the written record, the library, the archive, the school, and the university is one of the earliest and most characteristic achievements of the city."⁴ But the city does not merely collect a culture's achievements; it also teaches them, passes them on to successive generations. Through its art and architecture, a city infuses the complexity of culture into the very bones of those who daily walk its streets. Living literally in the

2. Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," in *Metropolis: Center and Symbol of Our Times*, ed. Philip Kasinitz (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 64.

3. I do not mean to imply that there are no differences in villages and no community in cities. However, Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction seems to me to be basically sound, even though it has often been simplistically applied.

4. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961), 30.

shadow of the Parthenon, the Athenian learns the complex meaning of Athena in a way inaccessible to the village peasant.

But Mumford's vision of the good city, like Pericles' vision of Athens, was one in which inhabitants shared a common culture. Ideally, this common system of values was then collected and transmitted through the machinery of city life. However, the actual experience of cities, even ancient Athens, was not that they perfected the cultural homogeneity of village life, but that they forced homogeneity to interact with otherness, forced radical differences to share the same space.

In her revolutionary work, *The Economy of Cities*, Jane Jacobs hypothesizes that the first cities arose as trading points fortuitously located near prize goods and near routes that minimized geographical barriers.⁵ For Jacobs, the primordial urban act, the city's founding myth, is an economic exchange with someone outside one's group, someone fundamentally other. Even if her thesis proves to be an inadequate historical explanation for the origin of cities, it still works to highlight something essential about them. Cities are places where the goods of foreigners, their food, clothing, gadgets and art, are made available for native experience. The city begins as a bazaar which, to native eyes, will inevitably be experienced as bizarre. Even when the original intent of a city's builders was to inculcate a specific value system into the populace, the economic nature of cities forced them to be forums for contrasting values. The growth and status of a city was intrinsically linked to the diversity of goods made available to its inhabitants.

Even today, the marvel of a great city, the rush and excitement of it, is the sheer multiplicity of things it contains. In a very real sense, great cities, "world" cities, contain the entire world, contain representations from every corner of space and time. Not only does the city include museums and libraries, it is itself a vast museum, a living library of faiths, tastes, styles and dreams packed densely together and available for experience in a reasonable amount of time.

As instrument for condensing and packaging the world's diversity, a city will obviously not be limited only to the world's "goods"; it will include as well the world's cruelties, perversions and deficiencies. In virtually every city there are places (Foucault calls them "heterotopias"⁶) which work to "suspect, neutralize, or invert" the established values of a society. Such places often prove the source for the frequent identification of the city with sin and crime in both the religious and popular imaginations.

5. Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 18-31.

6. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *Dinercities*, (Spring 1986), 24.

Eventually, it is even imagined that the city itself is the cause of corruption and that human beings would maintain their moral integrity if only they avoided the city and remained close to nature. Yet, even in the biblical myth, corruption originally happens in the garden. Cities do not create human degeneracy, they merely collect its varieties and market them. Just as city streets spread before their inhabitants a panoply of human achievements and refinements, so too is every conceivable perversion temptingly available there.

THE NATURE OF CITIES

Characterizing the city as a living museum correctly highlights its ability to condense the world and make it available for experience, but it is still an imperfect metaphor. The modern museum is a place one can choose to visit, a place where the world's artifacts and styles are neatly and conveniently categorized. The city is not at all like that; it often forces the world's diversity on its inhabitants—and in a random, chaotic flux. A mandated subway ride to work can include the haunting music of a Peruvian pipe band, the sexual preferences of a leathered couple, the stench of a homeless drunk, and the refinement of a perfectly tailored Armani suit. The rider cannot select experiences like channels on a television. The city has its own agenda and constantly insists that things beyond one's choice, unfamiliar things, be experienced and processed mentally. Collage is the inevitable urban art form because it is the inevitable structure of urban experience.

Admittedly, cities aren't the only places that have surprises. As Annie Dillard's meditations on Tinker Creek⁷ prove so forcefully, even the most domesticated field can confront one with radical otherness. However, it is not a human, social otherness. A defining characteristic of village society is its homogeneity. This is not to stereotype the peasant as a rube or the village as a place devoid of difference. Genuine individuality of character is famously fostered by village life. However, a village is ordinarily a place where people know one another, know the happenings and histories of each other's lives and share the same general values. A village is ordinarily not a place of deep racial, religious or even occupational diversity. Thus, the structure and dynamics of rural life constantly affirm one's own values because they are mirrored in the faces and styles of whomever one meets. If a different value does present itself, for example, Hester Prynne's illegitimate pregnancy in Hawthorne's *Scarlet*

7. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974).

Letter, or—to use a more contemporary example—Teena Brandon's transsexual activities in Kimberly Pierce's film, "Boys Don't Cry" (1999), it is all-too-often marked as alien and denied the chance to occupy the same space with established members of the community. Thus, even its anomalies end up confirming the fundamental homogeneity of rural life.

The structure of city life works against such uniformity. This isn't to claim that city dwellers are inherently more virtuous, less xenophobic, than villagers. Sixteenth century Venice invented the ghetto in an effort to keep Jews on the fringes of city life and New York's recent efforts with the homeless demonstrate that cities still try to value-segregate their population. But the economic life of the city dictates otherwise. Shylock and Antonio are forced to confront each other in the bargaining space of the Rialto and, however different their private lives, the Park Avenue diva and the Bowersy baglady face each other across the same space on the subway. The daily dynamics of city life, rather than providing affirmation of one's values, provide constant challenges to them instead. Different faces in the mirror keep one's mental life on edge and force it into accommodating and explaining such radical differences.

But the mental life on edge is the mental life awakened, the mental life at the beginnings of philosophy. It is precisely the forefronted anomaly that forces the mind to examine its rusty definitions and categories. The mind can rest comfortably in its conviction that all swans are white as long as it never sees a black swan. But once one is inescapably present, the habituated mind is jarred into rethinking its categories, is prodded, in other words, toward philosophy. Because the city condenses the bountiful confusion of reality into one place, if the world does contain any black swans, one will be passed sooner or later on a city street. Socrates claimed that the gods had sent him to Athens like a gadfly to a sleepy horse. His pestering questions provided the anomalies that awakened his listeners into philosophy. But the modern metropolis fulfills this same function; it is itself a gadfly, continuously pestering its inhabitants to include into their schema of reality foreign elements that they would often sooner forget. The city dweller, for example, does not have the luxury of choosing whether to think about the ethical issues of poverty; the poor cluster outside every grocery store and their pleas raise the same sort of questions Socrates did—and with the same annoying persistence.

This is not to claim, of course, that the city makes philosophy inevitable. City-dwellers themselves often find ingenious ways to evade the city, even while walking its streets (earphones, for example). But the flight from the city, in whatever form it happens to take, is often a disguised flight from philosophy, an effort to find some cave that will not pester one into thought.

But, some will argue, philosophy does not just need questioning stimulation to carry on its life, it also needs undistracting and focused places in order to reflect on the questions raised. Is not nature the more "natural" place for such meditation? I do not see why. The city has as many nooks and crannies for quiet retreat as the country. To identify the city with noisy chaos and the country with peaceful calm is to grossly stereotype both places.

Likewise, it is mistaken to see the city as the antithesis of nature, as devoid of the important possibilities nature offers for reflection. Cities are obviously situated within nature and often must work closely with it, as do cities situated near water or mountain passes. Cities also make the variety of nature present in ways that nature herself never could, as in zoos and botanical gardens. And nature in the midst of the city, nature "framed," as it were, by the city, often takes on a focused intensity especially helpful to meditation, as does the lone tree in a cloistered courtyard, for example, or a flowering window box against a brick building façade. Assuming philosophical activity to be a dialectical rhythm of stimulation and reflection, cities effectively provide for both.

I have been arguing that the essence of the urban is that it condenses humanity's diverse cultural achievements into one place and makes them a part of everyday experience in such a way as to stimulate that most human of activities: thought, philosophy. Every great city has a specific, centralized space in which this essential urban dynamic is played out. This space takes a variety of physical forms. Sometimes it is geometrically located at the city's center; sometimes it is a square orientated around a crucial political or religious site. It might be carefully designed and officially designated, or evolve haphazardly over years of public use. It must be unrestricted space, space accessible to the entire population. It must also be a genuinely magnetic space, space which daily attracts the city's variety into it, not just for functional purposes, but to celebrate and savor the communality of city life. Its ancient examples are the Greek *agora* and the Roman forum. Contemporary examples would be Beijing's Tiananmen Square, New York's Central Park, Paris' Place de la Concorde and London's Trafalgar Square. Because such places are the symbolic hearts of cities, places where the essential urban dynamic is readily available for enjoyment and contemplation, they are a key to understanding the meaning of cities.

"*Agora*" simply means meeting place.⁸ In early Greek cities the *agora* was the open air locus where major roads converged. Since it was used for civic meetings, it became synonymous with the place where public business

was discussed and decided. No town, however large, was considered a "*polis*" without an *agora*. By the time of Pericles (d. 429 BCE), the *agora* of Athens was a large square surrounded mostly by civic and religious buildings. It was a bustling city center where a multiplicity of activities was simultaneously available for participation and observation. [...]

PHILOSOPHY AND THE CITY

Philosophy has acquired the reputation of being ethereal and abstract, but if its paradigm is the Socratic dialogue, it was born amidst the bustle of the *agora*, born on the busiest corner of a great city. Socrates began his philosophical work by abandoning astronomy and turning his attention instead to the human diversity collected in the *agora*. To the condemned Socrates, Crito's offer of an escape from Athens meant escaping the sources of his own being, escaping philosophy itself.⁹ Socrates could not imagine the dialectical intensity of philosophy without the urban intensity of the *agora*.

Although the *agora*, in its historical form, was a phenomenon peculiar to ancient Greek cities, some form of *agora* is essential to city life itself. Just as the city condenses the world, there must be a place (or, in large cities, several places) where the city is itself condensed, where its essential function as a meeting place for differences is savored and celebrated, where its life is, as it were, dramatized.

Scholars believe that dramatic theater originated in the *agora* and only later moved to amphitheaters constructed especially for it.¹⁰ Sitting for a few hours on a bench in a modern *agora*—New York's Central Park, for example—is amazingly like attending a theatrical performance. The park becomes a stage on which the life of the city dramatizes itself and people are drawn to the park as both actors in, and audience for, this drama. The aesthetics of city theater, however, is not the unified action recommended in Aristotle's *Poetics*, but the found and fragmented unity of collage. Sitting on a park bench, one overhears pieces of passing conversation, accompanied always by the erratic rhythm of traffic. These aural pieces mix with unconnected visual vignettes: a Caribbean maid, for example, coaxing her white charges down a playground slide, a drug deal, an animated chess game, a woman quietly reading Baudelaire. These human vignettes are set against a sculptured skyline of tremendous power: "the majesty of piled-up stone, the spires pointing to heaven, the obelisks

9. Plato, "Crito" in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981), 42 (52b-53a).

10. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 57.

8. Spiro Kostof, *The City Assembled* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1992), 57.

of industry spewing forth against the firmament their packets of smoke, the prodigious scaffolding of monuments under repair, . . . the tumultuous sky, charged with anger and rancor."¹¹ The overall effect of this multimedia collage is not numbing confusion but amazement that so many contrasting dramas, each with its own comic and tragic intricacy, are being played out on the same stage. Baudelaire rightly insists that this uniquely urban collage provides the same sublime awe, the same "spiritual intoxication" that the Romantics found in the experience of nature.¹²

But, some will argue, this urban collage perfectly illustrates the alienating cruelty of modern city life. Yes, there are personal dramas in the city, but they are all played out alone, anonymously isolated from community and the sustaining support that only it provides. Those raising this objection have as their implicit social ideal the kind of "co-presence of subjects" advocated in Martin Buber's *I & Thou*. It is an ideal of human society in which people cease to be alien or strange to one another, in which people achieve a thorough mutuality of understanding, a sympathy of shared lives and values. It is society envisioned as a village community.

Viewed from this ideal, the separate lives collected in Central Park on any given day are indeed a pitiable lot; their histories are unshared and their values isolated. Yet it is precisely this circumstance, this liberation from the necessity of mutual understanding and agreement, that makes the city a magnet for the new, the offbeat and the creative. There is something troubling about enthroning communal unity as the guiding model for all social experience. As Iris Young points out, "the ideal of community denies the ontological difference within and between subjects."¹³ Communality is undoubtedly important and the city is adept at creating numerous communities of shared interest (gay communities, art communities, chess communities, etc.) that would be impossible in a rural setting. However, unity is only one side of human interaction; the other side is difference. If one person were really co-present to another, there would actually be no other left, only fusion. The energy of Central Park, or any alive city space, is that—to use Young's paradoxical phrase—it is "a place for the being together of strangers."¹⁴ The last thing the

11. Charles Baudelaire quoted in Michelle Hannoosh, "Painters of Modern Life: Baudelaire and the Impressionists," in *Visions of the Modern City*, eds. William Sharp & Leonard Wallock (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 176.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Iris Marion Young, "City Life and Difference" in *Metropolis: Center and Symbol of Our Times*, 256.

14. *Ibid.*, 264.

occupants of Central Park would want is to get to know everybody there. They relish their anonymity and the freedom from pigeonholing that only anonymity provides. At the same time, however, they also relish "being together," seeing and being seen by other anonymous selves. The Park is not just a place where different people happen to be functionally collected like at an airport or a department store. People purposely go to a park to pursue their own individual projects, but to pursue them publicly, to publicly be their private selves.

There is a subtle dialectic between public and private being worked out in any active city space. Take, for example, a common urban pleasure like reading on a park bench or in a sidewalk cafe. Surely there are more comfortable, less distracting places to pursue the very private act of reading! But the reader in the park doesn't really want solitude, she wants company—not in the sense of wishing she were conversing with friends instead of reading, but in the sense of wanting to pursue her own private ends in the company of others glad to be pursuing theirs. There is an undeniable bond in this, the quintessentially urban bond of sharing one's separateness with others, of together affirming the value of having radically different values, of having skateboarders and readers share a common space.

There is another aspect to the public/private dialectic that operates in urban space. The anonymity of the city, the fact that one is unknown to the vast majority of people encountered in a day, gives an excited edge to visual experience in the city, an edge akin to voyeurism and its psychological complement, exhibitionism. Reading in a city park or cafe mixes the pleasures of the text with the exhibitionist's pleasure of performing private acts in public. Strolling city streets has some of the thrill of a fashion runway, the ambience of a parade. People move through the city knowing that their gait, their clothes, their every mannerism is being observed and interpreted; they know this because they themselves have sat in the same parks or cafes and gazed with the same contemplative delight, the delight of the urban voyeur. Only in the city are eyes granted such continuous opportunity for staring, for the sustained and intense observation of human behavior so basic to philosophy.

15. I am very aware that there are important gender differences in the way the city is experienced. A woman alone in a park or cafe, for example, has to worry about unwanted approaches in a way that a man doesn't. An excellent effort at understanding some of these differences is made by Elizabeth Wilson in her book *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Important as these differences are, however, they do not invalidate the central point I am making about cities.

Nowhere is this visual dynamic better exemplified than in the behavior of lovers in the city. The intensity of romantic love, no matter where it arises, inevitably creates a private world of mystery and sensuous exploration. In the city, however, the sensuality which seems to be obliviously pursuing its own private course, is subtly affected by the gaze of others, by the excitement of displaying intimacy to objective eyes, of celebrating its mystery for strangers and making them complicit in its strangeness. Such a public display of erotic rites happens only amidst the anonymity of the city and the viewer attends to them with a mixture of reverence, embarrassment and philosophy.

CONCLUSION

It is not at all surprising or coincidental that lovers seek out and bask in the public privacy of urban places; as I have argued, urban places are, in their essential meaning, erotic places, places where the other is encountered, studied and enjoyed without any diminution of otherness. Roland Barthes saw this essential meaning of cities with perfect clarity:

The city, essentially and semantically, is the place of our meeting with the *other*, and it is for this reason that the center is the gathering place in every city; . . . the city center is felt as the place of exchange of social activities and I would almost say erotic activities in the broad sense of that word. Better still, the city is always felt as the space where subversive forces, forces of rupture, ludic forces act and meet. Play is a subject very often emphasized in surveys on the center; . . . a center was always experienced semantically by the periphery as the privileged place where the other is and where we ourselves are other, as the play where we play the other.¹⁶

What city means in the human psyche, what it has meant in the cycle of history, why it continues to both attract and repel us, is that it is the surest place for encountering human difference, the most effective mechanism for meeting the other. Whatever is genuinely other unleashes subversive forces in us, forces that rupture our standard understandings and move us to try out, to "play" other understandings. Plato saw clearly that such dangerous and exciting play, such *eros*, is synonymous with the

16. Roland Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," in *The City and the Sign*, eds. M. Gottreiner & Alexandros Ph. Logopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 96.

activity of philosophy. This playful *eros* is found most surely and most intensely at the city's center. Why would the philosopher choose to be in any other place?

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. How does Conlon define cities? Or, what is their nature?
2. What does Conlon think distinguishes cities from rural villages?
3. What metaphors does Conlon use to describe and discuss cities?
4. How does Conlon understand the role of the philosopher in the city? Compare his view to those of Plato, Dewey, Gavin, Lefebvre, and Grange.