Some Moments with Ben

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SOME MOMENTS WITH BEN

Ralph Ross

God, how Ben could talk! He was like a river in full flow, with currents and eddies moving back and forth and sometimes around, becoming a whirlpool whose center went out of sight. When I first knew Ben the talk was almost linear. Later it grew more and more tangential and circular, with allusions floating by until the water was filled with them, like logs piled high. I had never believed the old adage that if you talked your books you didn’t write them, but Ben made me change my mind.

I first encountered Ben in New York at a meeting of the Conference on Philosophy and the Sciences at the New School. George Boas was speaking and Ben, although I didn’t know it was he, rose to challenge him. By the time the exchange was over, Boas was flustered and Ben was suggesting that the speaker should learn more about the history of philosophy, which in fact was his forte. As I realized that the flood of Ben’s rhetoric had deluged Boas, I got up to clarify, in Boas’s language, what Ben had said, because it seemed to me that I understood Ben, had learned from him, and always would. Boas regained his composure and, at the end of the meeting, Mrs. Boas came over to thank me.

When I first met Ben at the University of Minnesota in 1955, he remembered the incident at once, which was typical of him, although I had forgotten it, which was typical of me. He told me that many people in New York had said we must meet, but we hadn’t. Ben was a friend of my friends in Minnesota, but at the moment their friendship was strained. Much as they appreciated Ben’s obvious powers, and much as they delighted in what he said, they felt he said too much, that his talk excluded their talk. To regain some equality, a supreme effort was needed. I was so enchanted by Ben that I volunteered. I spent about three days and nights with him, except for going home to sleep. We talked. We talked without stop on every subject we knew anything about, as well as some others, and I made sure I talked as much as he. On the third night, when I felt I could talk no more, Ben stopped. I suggested visiting our friends. We did, and sat quietly while they talked. Ben was forgiven, and loved again.

For twelve or thirteen years, Ben and I saw each other almost daily. We lunched together often, and barely got to our afternoon classes on time. Most of the time we ate where students ate, for Ben was a great
student watcher and hated to miss any opportunity to observe their curious ways. I still remember that when we saw an ill-favored young man with an ill-favored young woman, Ben said, "It's wonderful that there's some one for every one."

I was always impressed with Ben's concern for observation. People regularly commented on his extraordinary learning, his perception of relationships among seemingly disparate things, and his remarkable gift for theory, but they rarely noticed how closely he looked at the passing scene or how far he would go to see what he thought interesting. Nor was it often noticed what Ben thought interesting. Usually it was what we take for granted and so don't see: things that were ordinary or "normal" in our lives, in which we move as a bird does in air, alert perhaps, but with no attention to the medium. Here I should comment, parenthetically, that many of Ben's best ideas came from the intellectual equivalent of scrutinizing the ordinary, which is asking why things are what they normally are, rather than being puzzled only when they seem to go wrong.

Ben noticed events in the classroom, at faculty meetings, at academic conventions, in marriages, and in friendship, and he crafted them as links in the long chain of history he carried in his head. He seldom rattled that chain, so the unwary who thought of him as a sociologist could be stunned by Ben's enormous erudition when a question arose about the Middle Ages or, for that matter, the Catholic Reformation, and a score of other things. I remember when he suddenly immersed himself in ballet and its lore, noting relations between the ballet, primitive dance, and life itself.

The most amusing incident (to me, at least) in Ben's careful observation of things came at an annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Atlantic City early one autumn. I was to read a paper, which I prepared in Princeton, where I spent the summer. I came to New York briefly before the meeting, and my car was rifled of all its contents, including my briefcase, where my paper nestled in the standard clutter. There was no time to rewrite it, of course, and my notes had gone the way of the paper. When I got to the hotel in Atlantic City I tried to put together new notes from which I could talk. Ben was at the convention and in the same hotel. I called him and told him what had happened and he came to my room at once. I wrote frantically, with Ben reading over my shoulder and commenting constantly. Finally, it all seemed funny and we started to invent queries from the floor to which we gave answers ranging from the serious to the absurd.

My talk went well enough, although we had not guessed any of the
real questions. Afterward Ben and I strolled in the lobby, and I re-marked on the unusual number of handsome and elegantly dressed young women. Ben told me that the Miss America beauty contest opened that night and that some of the contestants were living in our hotel. He added, “Of course, we’ll go.” When I asked why we should, he looked a little pained, and said, “It’s a typical American event. Have you ever seen it?” I agreed to go.

At the beauty contest, Ben was at first intent on the proceedings. The young women not only paraded in bathing suits, but appeared in a talent show, and were rated on their performances. I remember some contestants singing, all badly, others acting in little skits, for all the world like high school dramatics, and one pretty and inept juggler, who dropped equipment all over the stage. We agreed that puritanism would not allow Americans to choose the most beautiful woman as winner of a beauty contest; Americans had to award the beauty crown for playing the piano or doing magic tricks, a far cry from the judgment of Paris, who chose Venus, although he did accept a bribe.

Toward the end of the evening, Ben kept turning in his seat, viewing the vast auditorium. He reminded me of an actor I knew who, when we went to the theatre, looked backward much of the time, not to search for acquaintances but to study the lighting. As we walked back to the hotel I asked Ben what he had been doing. With delight, he said, “We were at the only important sociological event in town. Most of the important American sociologists are in the same town tonight. And not one sociologist was in the auditorium.” He continued for a while, arguing that while sociologists will study everything, they will look at nothing. That we were there didn’t count because I was not a sociologist and Ben at that time thought of himself as a historian-social scientist.

Ben left Minnesota before I did. He went to New York and later I went to California. But I visited him in his large apartment on West End Avenue and met him when he visited Berkeley. I remember a dinner with Ben and Marie in their apartment. Ben had always loved to eat, but had been limited in what he could eat by the ulcers that bothered him for so many years, giving him a Napoleonic look because his right hand regularly pressed his stomach. He was somewhat defensive about the ulcers, because it is generally thought that they are not entirely somatic and Ben, as a confirmed Freudian, presumably knew that psychoanalysis might help, but he resisted it. Actually, he never seemed to believe much in Freudian therapy; his passion was Freudian theory. One day he met a former friend who had been through therapy, believed his therapy to have worked a miraculous cure, and made himself obnoxious by
explaining how well he was psychically while treating everybody shabbily. He noticed Ben’s hand still on his stomach and asked why in the world Ben didn’t go through psychoanalysis, as he had. Ben replied out of long and deep feeling. “If I became like you,” he said, “I would go around killing everybody else. As it is, I’m just killing myself.”

The dinner came some time after successful surgery on the ulcers. Ben made a big fuss about that dinner. It was to be a feast, apparently, with just Marie, Ben, and me to eat it and then to talk all night. But dinner turned out, apparently, to be a vast bowl of ordinary table salad, enough to feed at least eight, not just three. Marie and I each had a portion and Ben ate the rest. When he finished, he said, “That’s what I wasn’t allowed to eat while I had ulcers.” Then, probably noting perplexity on my face, he added rapidly, “I’ve had my feast. But now you’ll have yours.” And I did. The dinner went on for hours, like the talk.

More moments? No, I’ve told enough. The times of warmth and love, of talking deeply about ourselves, can’t be repeated here. All that remains to say is, “Goodbye, Ben. There won’t be another like you.”

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