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Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective: Wide Reflective Equilibrium and the Hermeneutical Circle

I

How to start in reflectively thinking about ethics, and more generally in thinking about what sort of people we would like to be, and about what sort of society and world-order we would like to see obtain or come to obtain? If we look about us at what has been said on such grand themes by people who are knowledgeable and reflective it is enough to give one a kind of vertigo. We have varieties of utilitarianism, contractarianism, duty-based theories, rights-based theories, perfectionist theories (some harking back to Aristotle), relativism or conventionalism, projectivist error theories, new forms of subjectivism, and new forms of noncognitivism. These are all theories, in themselves in many ways and at a number of different levels very different, which get articulated within the dominant Anglo-American analytic tradition.[1] When we step out of that ambience to traditions that tend to look at ethics rather more broadly, and not so much as a distinct philosophical subject matter to be pursued as a distinct branch of philosophy, the motley of voices is even more of a motley. Jürgen Habermas's communicative ethics integrally linked with his systematic critical theory of society is one thing, Michel Foucault's ethics of 'practices of the self' on the other side of a firm turning of his back on the project of constructing systematic moral foundations is quite another thing again, as is Hans-Georg Gadamer's still very different hermeneutical placement of such matters, as is – to point to still further radically different ways of doing things – the pragmatist approach

of John Dewey, Wittgenstein's approach to such matters, or Rorty's very contextualist, neo-pragmatist, neo-Wittgensteinian approach in the service of a conservative form of liberalism.

The differences here, both substantive and methodological, are not infrequently very deep. It isn't that these theorists more or less agree about what is at issue and give different answers to roughly the same questions as, say, Richard Brandt, Robert Nozick, David Gauthier and John Harsanyi do. Rather, the differences sometimes go so deep that it is not at all clear that there is a common subject-matter. The differences in conception are such that it may well be the case that no comparisons can be usefully made, not to mention the scouting out of anything like a unified project. What is there in common between R.M. Hare, Gadamer, Dewey, and Foucault that would make such scouting and comparisons fruitful? Do we not just have a tower of Babel here?

With a certain amount of trepidation and some ambivalence, I want to suggest that perhaps we do not. If we look carefully at what is involved in what I shall call (following Norman Daniels) an appeal to considered judgments in *wide* reflective equilibrium (a conception central to the work of John Rawls, but a conception which others, myself included, have adopted, adapted, modified, and have, as well, argued is a central underlying methodology in setting out an account of morality or of ethics), we shall come to see a way in which very diverse strands in thinking about ethics can be brought together into a unified whole.[2] When the method of wide reflective equilibrium (WRE) is integrated with a substantive critical theory of society developed with an emancipatory intent, we *may* have a project that can articulate a legitimate conception of a normatively acceptable order to set against the reality of what is now disorder and illegitimacy. Such a project, I shall suggest, would, in a fruitful articulation, use insights (insights valuable in themselves) drawn from Rawls, Williams, Foucault, Gadamer and Habermas, in a unified account which both makes sense of the moral terrain and gives us a coherently-integrated set of normative criteria to appeal to in social assessment and criticism and for making sense of our lives: lives that often, particularly under contemporary conditions, have the look of being senseless.

This, if it has any chance at all of success, cannot be an eclectic hodge-podge of diverse and incommensurable items. The items are

indeed diverse and they are stressed by their authors for very different purposes and often under very different frameworks; but, collected together and unified by WRE, the diverse elements can be seen to fit together into a coherent whole.

II

What we need to see is what WRE comes to and how it fits in with a critical theory of society. In responding morally and in reasoning morally we cannot escape starting from tradition and from some consensus. In this fundamental sense we unavoidably start from morality as *Sittlichkeit* and refer back, however far we go in a reformist or even in a revolutionary or iconoclastic direction, to that *Sittlichkeit*. We go back, that is, to a cluster of institutions and institutionalized norms, sanctioned by custom, through which the members of an actual social order fulfil the social demands of the social whole to which they belong. This must not be mistaken for an implicit defense of conservativism, for the reflective moral agent, starting with a distinctive *Sittlichkeit*, can and will reject certain, indeed perhaps whole blocks, of such institutional norms, refashion some of them, or perhaps forge some new ones. What we cannot do is to coherently reject, or stand aside from, the whole cluster of institutional norms of the life-world in which we come to consciousness and, so to say, start afresh. We cannot avoid starting from the deeply-embedded cultural norms that go with our interlocked set of institutions.

The norms that we, starting from our own culturally derived *Sittlichkeit*, would most resist abandoning, the ones that humanly speaking are bedrock for us, are the norms that Rawls takes to be our firmest considered judgments (convictions). They are norms that for him have a very strategic but still non-foundationalist place in our moral reasoning and in our conceptions of how we would justify our moral beliefs.[3] Here, in spite of what otherwise are enormous differences, Rawls and a hermeneuticist such as Gadamer have a common point of departure.

Starting with our firmest considered judgments and then turning a Rawlsian trick by utilizing a coherentist model of justification and rationalization, we will seek to get these judgments into *wide* reflec-

tive equilibrium. This would involve, in our reasoning from such a *Sittlichkeit*, a winnowing out of these culturally received norms. Rawls, like Habermas, and in the tradition of the Enlightenment, will not just stick with tradition, with what Hare called 'received opinion.'[4]

Let us see a little more exactly what wide reflective equilibrium comes to. Narrow or partial reflective equilibrium, the method in effect used by contemporary intuitionists, consists in getting a match between our considered particular moral convictions (judgments) and a moral principle or set of moral principles (which may themselves be more general considered convictions) which will systematize the more particular considered convictions so that we can see how they all could be derived from that principle or those principles, or at least recognize that they are best explained and rationalized by that principle or these principles, so that together the more particular moral convictions and more generalized moral principles form a consistent whole perspicuously displayed. This gives us a coherence theory of justification but not an adequately wide one.

Wide reflective equilibrium is also a coherence theory of justification and moral reasoning but it casts a wider net. It seeks to produce and perspicuously display coherence between 1) our considered moral convictions, 2) a set, or at least a cluster, of moral principles, and 3) a set or cluster of background theories, including most centrally moral theories and social theories, including in turn, social theories which are quite definitely empirical theories about our social world and about how we humans function in it.

We cannot take the point of view from nowhere or see ourselves as purely rational noumenal beings with no local attachments or enculturations.[5] If we self-consciously seek to place ourselves, vis-à-vis our considered moral convictions and overall moral and intellectual perspectives, in the perspective of some radically different time and place we will in considerable measure fail. Whether we like it or not we are children of modernity, and we are deeply affected by its conditioning and by its dominant consensus. (Even Islamic fundamentalists extensively educated in the West are not free of it. In certain key respects their reaction is more like the Counter-Enlightenment reaction of the German romantics to the Enlightenment.) It is perfectly true that this is a matter of degree. Some strata and some subcultures of industrial society are more influenced than others by moder-

nity, but my point is that all are deeply influenced. And, as the demystification of the world runs apace, we are becoming increasingly and more pervasively so influenced.

Within the culture of modernity there is disagreement as well as consensus, but what is important for WRE is that there is consensus. As in any justificatory venture, it is unavoidable that we start from there.[6] Questions of justification arise when we disagree among ourselves or when we, as individuals, are of two minds. To resolve these questions we must proceed from things that everyone involved in the dispute holds in common.[7] For justification to be possible we must find some common ground. Even when any of us are of two minds about some issue, we need, in thinking it through, to retreat as individuals to some relevant set of beliefs that, for the time at least, holds fast for us.

So we start in WRE from what we have a firm consensus about. In the broad cluster of the cultures of modernity there is, fortunately, a considerable overlap of considered convictions, including agreement in what I have called moral truisms, such as: it is wrong to torture the innocent, to break faith with people, to fail to keep one's promises, and the like. It isn't that these things can never be done, no matter what the circumstances. What is the case is that to do any of these things is ceteris paribus wrong. There is always a presumption against doing them and, particularly in the case of torturing the innocent, that presumption is very stringent indeed. These are deontic considerations but the moral consensus includes, as well, truisms such as: pleasure is good, pain is bad, it is a good thing to develop one's powers and to have meaningful work and meaningful human relationships. There is, in fine, a vast consensus about both deontological and teleological moral truisms. All ethical theories, ethical scepticism and its country cousins aside, accept these judgments and compete to show which best reveals their underlying rationale and coherence. Moreover, ethical scepticism only rejects them in the course of rejecting *all* moral judgments as somehow unjustified, perhaps because there is and can be, as J.L. Mackie put it, no objective prescriptivity.[8] Ethical sceptics do not single out these particular moral conceptions for rejection as having some distinctive defect; they reject them because they do not think any moral beliefs at all can be objectively warranted. (In its very generality perhaps such moral scepticism is suspect.) We should add

to the list of items over which there is now a firm consensus what Charles Taylor says we have developed a particular concern for since the eighteenth century, namely, 'a concern for the preservation of life, for the fulfilling of human need, and above all for the relief of suffering ... .'[9] There are, of course, deep disagreements over the right and the good, but there is plainly much agreement as well and we can and should *start* from the consensus in trying to rationalize morality, in trying to show, against nihilism, how the very institution of morality has a purpose and a point.

We start with our firmly-fixed considered convictions filtered for convictions that we would only have under conditions in which we would make errors in judgment, the errors we typically make when out of control, enraged, depressed, drunk, fatigued, under stress, in the grip of an ideology, and the like. But we do not rest content, as an intuitionist would, with simply making a fit between our particular moral convictions so pruned and our more general moral principles. WRE, unlike partial or narrow equilibrium, is not just the attaining of a fit between the considered judgments and the moral principles we remain committed to on reflection or the principles which are the simplest set of principles from which we could derive most of those considered convictions. Beyond that, WRE remains committed to a fit which also includes the matching of principles which not only satisfy the conditions just mentioned but as well match best with ethical theories, theories which are the most carefully elaborated and rationalized and in turn fit best with what we know about the world and the full range of our considered convictions, including convictions brought to bear in defense of these theories or in defense of background social theories relevant to them and which involve moral convictions, some of which are distinct from and logically independent of the considered convictions with which and from which we started. We shuttle back and forth between considered convictions, moral principles, ethical theories, social theories, and other background empirical theories and those considered judgments (at least some of which must be distinct from the initial cluster of considered judgments) that are associated with or are constitutive of or partially constitutive of the moral principles, social theoreies or other background theories. (The association will be such that they are standardly appealed to in justifying those principles or theories.) In such shuttling we sometimes modi-

fy or even abandon a particular considered conviction; at other times we abandon or modify a moral principle or come to adopt some new principles; and sometimes (though of course very rarely) we modify or even abandon a social theory or other background theory or even come to construct a new one. We move back and forth – rebuilding the ship at sea – modifying and adjusting here and there until we get a coherent and consistent set of beliefs. When we have done that, then we have for a time attained WRE. (It is important in such coherence accounts that we have a large circle involving many considerations rather than a small one.) This does not rule out the possibility that at a later time this equilibrium will be upset and that we will then have to seek a new equilibrium.

Put another way, the account of morality is the most adequate which most perspicuously displays the conceptions we should accept and act in accordance with. That is the account which a) fits together into a coherent whole the at least provisional fixed points in our considered convictions better than alternative accounts, b) squares best with our best knowledge and most plausible hypotheses about the world (including, of course, our social world), and c) most adequately (of the alternative accounts) provides guidance where we are, without recourse to a reflective application of the theory, not confident of what particular moral judgments to make or indeed, in the more extreme case, are at a loss to know what to do. Where we are unsure about a considered moral judgment, WRE will provide guidance concerning whether to continue to accept it or whether and how to revise it. In new situations (say in arguments about nuclear matters) it will better guide us in what extrapolations to make from the stock of judgments at hand than alternative accounts of morality. Such an account, to expand the last part a bit, will best show us what extrapolations to make in such situations from our stock of considered judgments in the light of what we know or reasonably believe about the world. Accounts which do these things better are the better accounts, and the ones that best do these things are the best accounts, i.e., the accounts which are for the nonce in reflective equilibrium.

Of course, a given account of morality might be better in one of these dimensions and worse in another. Where this obtains, and we cannot devise an account which unites these virtues for a time, then we will not have achieved WRE. We should also note, with Rawls,

that a Socratic element remains in all such reasonings. We unavoidably make reflective contextual judgments, all along the line, in any effective thinking about particular considered moral judgments, moral principles, ethical theories, rationalizing particular judgments and principles, making assessment of the facts, and in considering critical social theories with an emancipatory intent. In all those contexts we make reflective judgments about what to do or be. Moreover, in choosing ethical and social theories there will be an appeal to considered judgments and a reliance on our particular reflective judgments. We do not, anywhere along the coherentist path, get anything that is utterly value-free; there is no avoiding the necessity of making reflective judgments. If we say, for a given population at a given time and place, that they have put their judgments into WRE, and have shown that they are justified, that reflective equilibrium will not be one which thus could have been attained without their making such reflective judgments. We can have no algorithms here.

Our justificatory account of morality will be a holistic, antifoundationalist coherentism, in which to gain an adequate conception of morality and to represent the best moral point of view we can at a given time garner is not a matter of per impossibile getting a conception derived from, or in some other way based on, unchallengeable general principles. Neither is it a matter of deriving such principles from a set of self-evident propositions or squaring this moral point of view with a set of particular considered judgments which are not even in principle revisable or challengeable. No such quest for certainty, no such tacit appeal to foundationalism, is in order. Instead the justification of a claim that we have such a moral point of view is 'a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into a coherent view.'[10] Here, unlike in intuitionism or in another view which would stick with narrow reflective equilibrium, our sense of what is right and wrong, good and bad, while starting from tradition, may undergo extensive change at the behest of critical reasoning and investigation. On this thoroughly fallibilistic coherence account, where all claims, including any considered judgments at any level, are, at least in theory, revisable, there is no foundationalist appeal to some moral beliefs (say some of our concrete considered convictions) as basic or self-warranting. Our grounds for accepting moral principles are not that they systematize pre-

theoretical considered judgments which carry epistemological privilege. None of the moral judgments, moral principles, moral theories, or background social theories carry any privilege. The point is to get these diverse elements into a coherent whole which does justice to the importance and relevance of our firmest convictions, to our best rationalized social and moral theories, and to what we know or reasonably believe about the world. No elements are uncriticizable: none form a justificatory base which we simply must accept, though indeed some of them may never in fact be doubted or actually be subjected to criticism, and it is, as the pragmatists stressed, impossible to doubt them all at once. Something must for the nonce stand fast while we doubt other beliefs, but, this, as Peirce showed against Descartes, does not mean that any belief is permanently indubitable. Indeed for some of them it is astronomically unlikely that there will be any point at all in doubting them, but this does not mean they are indubitable.

So at no place along the line is there a foundationalist claim, not even with our firmest considered convictions. The point is not to try to find such an Archimedean point but to gain instead, for a time, and always subject to future revision, the most coherent package of beliefs relevant to how our life in society is to be ordered and how we are to care for our own lives as individuals. Justification in ethics comes to getting these beliefs in WRE.

III

A persistent worry about WRE is that, starting from a particular agreement in considered judgments at a particular time and place, it will in one way or another be ethnocentric: it will be skewed from the beginning along class or cultural lines and the like. Such unavoidable starting points in local attachments cannot, the claim goes, but skew the outcome.

This worry does not take seriously enough what WRE is or attend carefully enough to how it works. We *may* possibly get such cultural skewing in the end, that is after we have for a time achieved WRE, just as we have it at the beginning, but there is no necessity about this, and it is unlikely if we resolutely reason in accordance with WRE. We can have no guarantees here – we should avoid taking the

a priori or transcendental road – and we would not know whether this non-skewing was so until we had carried through such reasoning thoroughly and in turn had reflectively reconsidered it. Nevertheless, we can have good hunches about the critical potential of WRE.

Suppose we started not from a consensus we could actually at tain in a Western society such as ours, but from a *Sittlichkeit* which was that of an Anscombeish-Donaganish Hebrew-Christian morality (by now a rather out-of-date Hebrew-Christian morality) that actual ly might have been our *Sittlichkeit* in an earlier period in our history. Among the core considered convictions that would be a part of our consensus in the initial situation in such a life-world would be that voluntary sterilization is impermissible because it is a form of self-mutilation, that casual sex must be evil because it cannot but be exploitative, that abortion, suicide, euthanasia, and sex outside of marriage are all *categorically* impermissible. But that we would start with such a consensus does not mean that we would end with it after protracted cultural debate *where the contestants would be committed to us ing WRE*. To have such a commitment means not only appealing to a partial reflective equilibrium which might take it as sufficient to get our considered judgments to fit with the first principles of the natural moral law, but, more radically and extensively, to get them into equilibrium with the best rationalized moral theories, social and other relevant empirical-cum-theoretical theories, and with the best factual knowledge we have about the world. It is, to put it minimally, very doubtful indeed whether such an initial consensus in considered judgments could survive the justificatory demand that we get such judgments into the most coherent package of this whole range of beliefs. We unavoidably start with local attachments, firm bits of our culture, and we can never break out of the hermeneutical circle or the web of belief and just see things as they are *sub specie aeternitatis*. But, to refer again to Otto Neurath's metaphor, we can rebuild the ship at sea. We have with WRE the conceptual and empirical equipment to criticize the considered convictions from which we start. Nothing in that starting point justifies metaphors of conceptual or cultural imprisonment. WRE is not a disguised form of subjectivist and ethnocentric intuitionism which views itself self-deceptively as a form of objectivism. We will not get certainty, but knowledge with certainty

is not pleonastic and fallibilism is not scepticism or subjectivism. It is rather late in the day to have nostalgia for the absolute.

IV

Norman Daniels, to whom my account of WRE is indebted, gives, as does Rawls, too traditionalist an account of the relevant background theories. Traditional moral (normative ethical) theories, I agree, do have a considerable role in displaying such background theories, as does a conception of a well-ordered society.[11] Moreover, I also agree with Rawls and Daniels that at the next level of WRE a theory of the role of morality in society, a theory of persons, and a theory of procedural justice should be appealed to. And finally, I agree that, furthest in the background as vital feasibility tests for the other claims, there should be a general social theory and a theory of moral development. In assessing proposed moral principles, such as a self-realizationist (perfectionist) principle, the principle of utility, or Rawls's two principles of justice, it is vital to examine closely the claims and rationales of various moral theories and to see what they can say for the principles they propose and against the principles they criticize. In turn, in assessing these theories we need a theory of the role of morality in society. So far so good. In Daniels's account, however, too much stress in these assessments is placed on working out a theory of persons and a theory of procedural justice. More attention than necessary or desirable is placed on typical philosophical and legal concerns, and not enough on characterizing and exploring the role of general social theory in such contexts and on specifying what kind of social theory we need. Too much attention is directed to philosophy as traditionally conceived, not enough to sociology and critical theory.

In showing that this is so, I shall proceed indirectly. Michel Foucault, in responding to the question why he should be interested as well in politics, a question he took to be self-answering, responded as follows:

> ... what blindness, what deafness, what density of ideology would have to weigh me down to prevent me from being interested in what is probably the most crucial subject to our existence, that is to say the society

> in which we live, the economic relations within which it functions, and the system of power which defines the regular forms and regular permissions and prohibitions of our conduct. The essence of our life consists, after all, of the political functioning of the society in which we find ourselves.[12]

To be seriously interested in ethics, at least in societies such as ours, is to be deeply interested as well in politics. In ethics we care about the quality of our lives and our relations to others. Thinking in a theoretical way about ethics, we know that these matters are central objects of concern in the moral life. That they are so much a part of the moral life means, if we care about morality (as given our conditioning most of us will), that we must also care about our society. Plainly, the care of ourselves, care for the quality of our lives and the kinds of relations we can have with others, is deeply and pervasively affected by the kind of society in which we live. Moreover, our hopes for human enhancement, for the extensive and equitable satisfaction of our needs, and for self-development are importantly tied to what it is reasonable to hope concerning the possibilities for social change and concerning the kind of society we can reasonably expect and, with or without optimism of the will, sensibly struggle for. To have any reasonable understanding here, we must, if such knowledge can be had, understand at least how our society works and hopefully how societies generally work. We need to understand our society's social and economic structure, its structures of legitimation, what holds it together, what could change it, the direction and limits of change, and how permanent those changes are likely to be.

We need, if anything like this is to be had, as much knowledge of these things as we can get to help us in coming to know what we should strive for, how we are to live, and what is right and wrong. Ethics and politics (pace Henry Sidgwick) are inextricably intertwined, but traditional ethical theories are of little help here.[13] Indeed it is very likely that ethical theory, at least as traditionally understood, is more of an impediment than an aid to both understanding and reasonable advocacy and that metaethical theories are no help at all, except to explode the myths of ethical rationalism. In developing an adequate WRE we need more sociology and less philosophy (at least as traditionally understood). While in the past figures such as Aristotle, Au-

gustine, Montesquieu, and Hobbes were of central importance over such matters, it is now thinkers in the mold of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim that should be our models for the kind of social theory we need, not philosophers. (Dewey is a partial exception, but he did not march lockstep with the tradition. It is not uncommon for philosophers to think that he was hardly a philosopher at all.)

V

Given such a conception of WRE, it is vital to see if we can develop anything intellectually respectable that counts as a holistic critical theory of society with an emancipatory intent. (My interest here is to schematize such a theory. I am not concerned with how it matches or fails to match Habermas's account.) I am also largely indifferent to whether this critical theory is to be called philosophy or a part of a successor subject to philosophy. If 'philosophy' is construed broadly as an attempt to see things in a comprehensive way in an attempt to make sense of our lives, then a critical theory of society is also a part of philosophy, but many would want to construe 'philosophy' more narrowly as part of a distinct disciplinary matrix. What is important is not whether a critical theory of society is or is not philosophy but whether it makes a disciplined set of claims that can be warrantedly asserted and will provide us with an adequate account of what society is like and how it can change.[14] Critical theory wants to help us to come to understand how things hang together and how some ways in which things could hang together could answer more adequately to human needs and be more liberating of human powers than others. In seeking WRE, having a social theory which really did such things is of considerable importance. If such a theory is not to be had, that would considerably diminish the force of WRE. What it could achieve without such a theory would be far less than what could be achieved with a viable critical theory.

The critical theory we are seeking, on the perhaps illusory hope that it is attainable, is a holistic theory which will display and explain in a comprehensive way how things hang together. It is a descriptive-explanatory theory, an interpretive theory, and a normative critique. In such a theory elements of philosophy as more traditionally

conceived will be amalgamated with the human and social sciences with none of the elements claiming hegemony and with philosophy giving up all pretensions to being an autonomous 'guardian of reason.' (To claim this is not to defend irrationalism or to rage against reason, though it is to reject philosophical rationalism. Friedrich Waismann's dictum that the heart of rationalism is irrational is salutary.)

Critical theory, while remaining descriptive-explanatory, will also provide a comprehensive critique of culture, society, and ideology. It is here, of course, where it will have its critical-emancipatory thrust, though it will have this to a very considerable extent indirectly by way of its descriptive-explanatory and interpretive power. It will help us not only to see better who we were, are, and might become; it will, where there are alternatives, help us see who we might better become and what kind of society would be a more just society, and not only a more just society but also a more humane society that more adequately meets human needs and aspirations. Here WRE and a critical theory of society mutually require each other, at least if we are to have anything more than an impoverished WRE. It is important to recognize that critical theory is not a fancy word-picture – a grand philosophical-social vision – but an empirical-cum-theoretical theory that must meet empirical constraints.[15] It is a descriptive-explanatory theory, showing us the structure of society, the range of its feasible transformations, and the mechanics of its transformation.

Critical theory is a project of modernity, growing out of the Enlightenment. To give post-modernism its due, it is reasonable to be sceptical about whether social theories on such a grand scale can meet anything like reasonable empirical constraints. They may, after all, their authors' intentions to the contrary notwithstanding, be just grand theories or meta-narratives providing us with accounts which are nothing more than dressed up word pictures. Whether critical theory can be something more (can, that is, be a genuine critical theory) will depend on whether it proves able to solve some determinate human problems, e.g., whether it gives us guidance for what to say and do about abortion or terrorism, whether it develops a theoretical practice that has a clear emancipatory pay-off, whether it is a theory whose descriptive-explanatory structure actually can be utilized so as to yield explanations which are true or approximately true, and finally whether these explanations, together with the evaluative and normative claims

contained in the theoretical practice, are set together into a well-matching, interlocking, comprehensive, and persipicuously articulated framework. This is, of course, a portion of WRE, for it requires a theory of society; and, unsettlingly, it is also the case that the prospects of carrying such grand theory to successful completion, or even to a promising temporary closure, are daunting. (Perhaps talk of 'completion' for such a program is a mistake.) But it is one thing to find the prospects daunting and quite another thing again to say there is something incoherent about the very idea of such a project. That latter conceptual stopper has not been made out. It has not, that is, been shown that there is something incoherent about the very idea of a comprehensive critical theory of society. The difficulties concerning scope, the problems posed by the knowledge-explosion, the complexity of the social world, and the like appear at least to be empirical difficulties and not difficulties in the very idea of a holistic social theory. The proof of the viability of critical theory will be in the self-critical carrying out of something like this program of a critical theory – a program, if achievable, which would provide the appropriate social theory for WRE and, more generally, have an emancipatory potential.

Post-modernists will resist such claims to theory. Not a few will claim that the incommensurability of competing theories and forms of life runs too deep for grand theories to be possible. What we get instead with the attempt is ideology disguised as theory. Great unmaskers like Marx and Freud are, the claim goes, unwittingly wearing a few masks themselves. Habermas, defending the ideals of the Enlightenment, responds by arguing, correctly I believe, that critical theory requires and permits the firm distinction between theory and ideology without which the very possibility of social critique is undermined.[16]

Critical theory argues that in our life-world there is embedded a whole array of distorted legitimating beliefs which, taken together, provide us with legitimating myths. (Talk of 'legitimation' here is, of course, in a sociological sense only.) These false beliefs and the associated mistaken attitudes go into the make up of our world-picture and our social consciousness, and they prompt us to commend, or at least accept as necessary, a network of highly repressive institutions and practices, including the acceptance of certain conservative political attitudes and an authoritarian work discipline. These are very central,

ideologically distorted beliefs – a system of legitimating myths – that underwrite our repressive social system.

Given this, a critique of ideology is a vital element in a critical theory, but this very claim also dramatically underscores the need to be able clearly to distinguish critical theory from ideology and more generally ideology from non-ideology, distorted discourse from undistorted discourse. What, in fine, would a cluster of non-ideological legitimating beliefs look like? What would it be to have a true account of society where, against post-modernist irony and a pervasive scepticism, we would come to have a correct picture of our needs, their proper scheduling, and an ideologically cleared-up self-understanding, enabling us in this important way to see the world rightly? (Post-modernists will, of course, challenge the very idea of seeing the world rightly.)

Let us see, roughly following Habermas, whether we can characterize a set of circumstances in which, if they were to obtain, legitimating beliefs could plausibly be said to be nonideological. This is, of course, a model. We are talking about counterfactual circumstances and not about our class-divided and pervasively sexist societies, but it is important for the coherence of this model that the circumstances are not so 'otherworldly' that we could not conceive what it would be like for them to obtain. That they have this empirical significance does not mean, for the model to do its work, that we have to be able to spell out the causal mechanisms that would bring them into existence. It must be a situation in which our legitimating beliefs (including, of course, central moral beliefs) are formed and argument for them is sustained in conditions of absolutely free and unlimited discussion and deliberation. All parties to the institutions and practices being set up must be in a position such that they could recognize that they are freely consenting to their establishment under conditions in which the only constraints on their acceptance derive from the force of the better argument or the more careful deliberation. Where we so discourse we have undistorted, non-ideological discourse. Moreover, where we so reason and actually succeed in achieving a consensus we do not merely have a consensus, we have a rational consensus. In our class-divided, ethnically-divided and religiously-oriented cultures (with the religious divisions that standardly brings) we do not get such a consensus; but if we were to get a consensus under the conditions of undistorted discourse I have just described, a consensus which would

plainly be an unforced consensus and a consensus which is conceivable no matter how unlikely it may be, then in such a circumstance we would have conditions in place for undistorted, nonideological discourses. A critical theory of society articulates a model of discourse which, if followed, would take us beyond the distortions of ideology and give us a certain kind of objectivity.[17] WRE, in appealing to a theory of society, should appeal to a critical theory, for critical theory would adumbrate a conception of a theory of society which could help provide the corrections needed for the not infrequent ethnocentrism of partial reflective equilibria.

There is also the problem of incommensurability. There are those who say that the history of ethics, like the history of philosophy and the history of culture more generally, is a series of contingencies or accidents of the rise and fall of various, often incommensurable, language-games and forms of life. Philosophers stubbornly retain a nostalgia for the Absolute; but, after all, like a return to pure laissez faire, that is just nostalgia, for no such Archimedean point is available to us. There are no ahistorical standards of rationality or objectivity providing us with ahistorical reasons for acting, reasons that can be seen to be good reasons independently of time, place, and circumstance.

What should be challenged (Peter Winch, Thomas Kuhn, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty to the contrary notwithstanding) is whether there really are such incommensurable abysses, whether we really suffer from a conceptual imprisonment, caught up, as it is claimed we are, in various incommensurable hermeneutical circles.[18] There is much in both our intellectual and political culture which sees us as being ineluctably creatures of incommensurable perspectives. There just are rival points of view concerning the truth or falsity, the warrantability or unwarrantability, of scientific theories or moral conceptions, the propriety of political arrangements or the aesthetic qualities of works of art. On examination, the claim goes, we find we have incommensurabilities here incapable of being brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be achieved or how we could reasonably settle matters where we differ.

However, we are – or so I would claim – not stuck with rival points of view. WRE, rather than sanctifying or rationalizing our alleged stuckedness, can be generalized in such a way that we can free ourselves from 'conceptual imprisonment.' When faced with an in-

commensurability claim, the claimants on either side of the putative abyss should, for a time, bracket the contested claim and, as in the initial stages of WRE, try to isolate whatever assumptions and procedures they both take to be noncontroversial in the context of that controversy.[19] Where some common ground is found, as is virtually certain if the search is more than perfunctory, then further deliberations between them should start from a point of view where only these shared assumptions and procedures are taken for granted. The strategy is again to work outward toward the contested areas from a consensus and indeed from what predictably will be, if we continue in this way, a widening consensus; and then, with that consensus firmly in mind and perspicuously arranged, to again make an onslaught on the disputed area, working carefully with lines of inference from the area of consensus. There can, of course, be no a priori guarantees that we will find such a background consensus or be able, reasoning carefully from that consensus, to resolve the issues or even narrow them. But that there are no a priori guarantees should not be worrisome if we have good empirical reasons to believe such a consensus is achievable. And we do have this. And, even if we only have the initial consensus, we then can know that strong incommensurability theses are mistaken. We are not caught in radically different conceptual universes, points of view or forms of life between which there are, and can be, no bridges to a rational and objective resolution of what sets us apart. We do not have to be rationalists not to believe in a post-modernist alienation of reason.

NOTES

1 There are a variety of criss-crosses here. There can be contractarian theories which are utilitarian and projectivist or non-cognitivist theories which can be construed as ontological theses about values, as theses about the logical status of moral utterances, or as epistemological theses about whether, and if so in what way, some moral reactions can be knowledge claims. But a non-cognitivist or projectivist might also be a utilitarian, a perfectionist or a deontologist. We have, in fine, a considerable range of combinations and permutations here.

2 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1971), 19-21, 48-51, 577-87; 'The Independence of Moral Theory,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* **48** (1974-75) 5-22, 7-10. Norman Daniels, 'Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics,' *The Journal of Philosophy* **76** (1979) 256-82; 'Moral Theory and Plasticity of Persons,' *The Monist* **62** (1979) 265-87; 'On Some Methods of Ethics and Linguistics,' *Philosophical Studies* **37** (1980) 21-36; 'Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedean Points,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* **10** (1980) 83-103; 'Two Approaches to Theory Acceptance in Ethics,' in David Copp and David Zimmerman, eds., *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld 1985); and 'An Argument About the Relativity of Justice,' *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* (1987). Jane English, 'Ethics and Science,' *Proceedings of the XVI World Congress of Philosophy*. Marsha Hanen, 'Justification as Coherence,' in M.A. Stewart, ed., *Law, Morality and Rights* (Boston: D. Reidel 1983) 67-92. Kai Nielsen, 'On Needing a Moral Theory: Rationality, Considered Judgements and the Grounding of Morality,' *Metaphilosophy* **13** (1982) 97-116; 'Considered Judgments Again,' *Human Studies* **5** (1982) 109-18; and *Equality and Liberty* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld 1985), Chapter 2.

3 John Rawls, 'Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* **14** (1985) 223-51; 'The Independence of Moral Theory'; 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,' *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7.1 (1987) 1-25

4 John Rawls, 'The Independence of Moral Theory'; 'A Well-Ordered Society,' in Peter Laslett and James Fishkin, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Fifth Series (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1979) 6-20

5 G.A. Cohen, 'Reconsidering Historical Materialism,' in J.R. Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., *Nomos* XXVI, *Marxism* (New York: New York University Press 1983); Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (London: Hogarth Press 1976), 145-216

6 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 580-1

7 Ibid.

8 J.L. Mackie, *Contemporary Linguistic Philosophy – Its Strength and Its Weakness* (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press 1956); *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1977); *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1980).

For a discussion of Mackie's views and, more generally, of projectivism and the rejection of objective prescriptivity, see the essays in Ted Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1985).

9 Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), 155. Given the slaughter and degradation of humans by humans so characteristic of the twentieth century, from Hitlerism and Stalinism, to South Africa, to the actions of the United States Government in sustaining what it regards as its own sphere of influence either on its own or through its proxies, it is hard to believe that there really are out there the beliefs of which Taylor speaks. What can be said is that while the people portrayed in Icelandic sagas could hack away at each other with a clear conscience, we need complicated rationalizations to butcher and torture each other, and without these rationalizations there is a widespread horror and revulsion at the killing and the infliction of suffering. So there is a tortured way in which we really do believe that needless suffering is to be avoided. However, even with us there may be subcultures without such a belief.

10 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 21, 579

11 See the references in Note 2 and most particularly Daniels's 'Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedean Points.'

12 Michel Foucault, 'Human Nature: Justice versus Power,' in Fons Elders, ed., *Reflexive Water* (London: Souvenir Press 1974), 168. This is a debate with Noam Chomsky.

13 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1985), 74, 120, 151-3, 171-3, and 198

14 It would have to be what has been called 'grand theory.' See Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (London: Cambridge University Press 1985). To be valuable it would have to have the constraints Frederick Crews notes in 'The House of Grand Theory,' *The New York Review of Books* 33.9 (May 29, 1986) 36-43.

15 Frederick Crews, 'The House of Grand Theory,' rightly stresses the need for such constraints but wrongly claims that Marxist or Freudian theories must be retrograde in this respect, functioning more like religious *Weltanschauungen* than scientific theories. Richard Miller shows how Marxist accounts can be genuine social science, meeting

the constraints Crews requires without the positivist fetters that Crews takes to be hobbling. See Richard Miller, *Analyzing Marx* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1984). See also Rodger Beehler's critical notice of Miller's book in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* **17**.1 (1987) 199-226.

16 Perhaps the most crucial thing to see here is his exchange with Rorty. See Richard Rorty, 'Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity' and Jürgen Habermas, 'Questions and Counterquestions,' both in Richard J. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1985). But see, as well, Habermas's 'The Genealogical Writing of History: On Some Aporias in Foucault's Theory of Power,' *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* **10** (1986) 1-9, and his 'Modernity versus Postmodernity,' *New German Critique*, **22** (Winter, 1981) 3-14.

17 For a sense of the complexity of the concept of objectivity see Thomas Nagel, 'The Limits of Objectivity,' in Sterling McMurrin, ed., *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press 1980) 77-139. See also Bernard Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and discussions of his book by H.L.A. Hart, *The New York Review of Books*, **33**.12 (July 17, 1986) 49-52, and by Thomas Nagel, *The Journal of Philosophy* **83** (1986) 351-9.

18 Isaac Levi, 'Escape From Boredom: Edification According to Rorty,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* **11** (1981) 589-602; and my 'Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy,' *Inquiry* **29** (1986) 277-304, and 'Can There Be Progress in Philosophy?', *Metaphilosophy* **18**.1 (1987) 1-30.

19 Levi, 'Escape From Boredom'