ON FINDING ONE'S FEET IN PHILOSOPHY:
FROM WITTGENSTEIN TO MARX*

KAI NIELSEN

I

This address will be resolutely meta-philosophical. It will reflect some of my ambivalence about philosophy. Perhaps more than most people whose conceptions of philosophy were formed in the first two decades following the Second World War, I have my difficulties about the point of doing philosophy, remain ambivalent about what it can and cannot do and remain unsure about what it should try to be. I am both depressed and astounded at the complacency with which so many philosophers view philosophy. They seem to have no awareness of how marginal our discipline has become or, at the very least, is felt to be by many people (including intelligentsia) outside of philosophy (Worsley, 1982).

I shall try to confront these things and ask, knowing what we know now and standing where we stand, what philosophy can plausibly be and what it ought to be or at least try to be. To proceed in any reasonable way here we need to say something about what philosophy has been in our recent history and how well its research projects have panned out.

This, of course, is a vast subject and a tendentious one. It is plain that anyone who sets out to talk about it in a way which is not utterly platitudinous will skew her discussion in a certain way, perhaps skew it so badly that many of the key issues get begged at the outset. I think one way of offsetting that to a certain extent is to begin in a rather autobiographical way and to indicate something of the philosophers and ways of doing and viewing philosophy that have formed me. That would be rather self-indulgent, if it were not reasonable to believe that what I say about myself also in part narrates a history that is not, among my generation, so terribly unique to me and that in that narrative there may be an object lesson. So I shall start by being auto-biographical.

Around 1950, when I was finishing my dissertation, the ideas of the post-tractatus Wittgenstein and something related, but a little more pedestrian, namely what was variously called Oxford philosophy or ordinary language philosophy, rapidly and extensively penetrated the whole of the English speaking philosophical world. It came first through Oxford philosophy

(principally Ryle) and through the reading of typescript copies of *The Blue Book* and *The Brown Book* and two collections of articles by John Wisdom. (I still remember the exhilaration I felt when in one sitting I read *The Blue Book* with the sense that scales were falling from my eyes.) A little later *The Philosophical Investigations* became available to us. It was excitedly discussed and indeed, by many of the older professors even bitterly discussed. Their ways of doing things were already rather set and they felt challenged. For me it turned around my philosophical outlook and practice. This manifested itself in three ways: first, it confirmed and — or so it seemed to me — strikingly vindicated my setting aside of metaphysics and epistemology. That was something my initial philosophical interests predisposed me toward and an earlier study of pragmatism and a little later of logical empiricism had reinforced. But the study of Wittgenstein stamped it in thoroughly.

Secondly, Wittgenstein turned me away from the study of logic and what was then called ideal language philosophy. Just prior to the onslaught of Wittgenstein, I had, in the course of writing my thesis, come under the influence of C.I. Lewis and Rudolf Carnap. While it seemed to me what was significant in their work was done quite without the use of logical techniques their authority was such that I thought, much against my inclinations, that I somehow should use such techniques, though I could not, for the life of me, see how the use of them would further the resolution or the dissolution of any philosophical question I was interested in. Wittgenstein (along with Moore, Wisdom, Waismann and Austin) put an end to all that. I came to see how we could do something rigorous and conceptual without engaging in what seemed to me the pointless activities of logic. It wasn't regimented ideal languages we needed, what we needed was to command a sufficiently clear view of the workings of our own language so that we could break philosophical perplexities where they emerged from our misunderstandings of the workings of our language. We operated *with* our language well enough, in the standard contexts, but we, around certain philosophical issues, fell into perplexity when we tried to operate *upon* it. (Of course, most philosophers caught in such perplexities would not see it that way. To make it apparent that their philosophical perplexities were about the workings of their language was a central task for a Wittgensteinian philosopher.)

The third, and I suspect the most important, turn around Wittgenstein forced on me was, for a time, to shift the whole emphasis of my work in ethics. I was trying, at the time I started to study Wittgenstein, to work out a defense of the emotive theory of ethics against its more rationalistic critics and indeed even against more sympathetic critics such as Hare and Nowell-Smith. I thought, and still think, that Stevenson's and Hägerström's accounts are more powerful than is usually realized, though I also thought at the time that their accounts were approximately right. The study of Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy changed that. We should, I came to think, worry less about the logical status of evaluative utterances and come to concentrate more, in the specific contexts of morality and of politics, on

what made something a good reason in ethics. We should worry less about what "good" means and concentrate more on what good reasons are and on the underlying structure of moral reasoning. I saw Toulmin, Findlay, Baier and myself, and in his very early work, Rawls as well, as trying to carry out a very analogous project in moral philosophy to the work done by Wittgenstein and Wisdom in philosophical psychology, the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language. (Nielsen, 1957a, 1957b, 1958, 1960, 1964, 1968) and I expected similar things to be done in legal, social and political philosophy. (Hart seemed to be paving the way here.)

Much of that seems very distant to me now, but it informed all my earlier work in ethics and, with a good spicing of something of logical empiricism, my work in the philosophy of religion as well. Some of this, of course, is idiosyncratic to me, but much of this turning away from ideal language philosophy and developing Wittgensteinian techniques is common to philosophers of my generation.

II

After that I slowly began to get out of step with the philosophical *Weltgeist*. This happened gradually and without an iconoclastic intent on my part. But, all the same, it became a reality.

Wittgenstein did not study language systematically. He did not set out to construct a philosophy of language, he did not try to utilize the results of lingusitics or to contribute to the development of linguistics or to integrate philosophy and linguistics. Instead, he sought, by reminding us of how language actually works in particular contexts, where there is actual philosophical perplexity, to break the spell that a mistaken picture of language can come to have on us. But this does not require an alternative theory, though it does require that we develop a cultivated ear for the workings of our language and that we do have a good feel for philosophical problems. However, under the influence of Austin in England and under the quite different influence of Quine and Chomsky in North America (influences which were themselves diverse), philosophy began to take a different turn. At first Austin seemed like a more exacting, less programmatic and less exciting Wittgenstein, but as his search for the performative petered out in the last third of *How To Do Things With Words*, it became clear that Austin's analysis no longer tied itself to identifiable philosophical problems and developed instead an interest in language for its own sake that would better transfer itself to linguistics. And where such work did stick with a philosophical problem, as in Paul Ziff's *Semantical Analysis*, it became evident enough, as the book was inspected carefully, that Ziff's analysis of "good" did not require the elaborate linguistic paraphernalia he deployed to do the job. I found myself, as work like this unfolded, thoroughly out of sympathy with the turn to linguistics in the 60's and the 70's. It seemed to me, and it still seems to me, to have never felt the bite of what Wittgenstein was on to

about the role of language in philosophical activity. In any event, it seemed to me to be a wrong turning and I ignored it after its initial developments.

Instead, I cultivated my garden by continuing my work in moral philosophy, though with less and less concern about the logical status of what I was doing or with whether I was making what Wittgenstein would call "grammatical remarks" or with whether I was doing normative ethics or meta-ethics or about whether philosophers could properly do normative ethics. Once those demarcations seemed to me terribly important to make. I once thought that to progress in thinking about morality, to be clear about what we were doing when we did philosophy, we needed to be clear about such boundary questions. But slowly that belirf withered away. Instead I simply tried to think about moral and, increasingly, political questions as carefully as I could, utilizing a very minimal philosophical vocabulary though I did continue to attend, where relevant, to the workings of our language and to draw contextually pertinent distinctions where they were, as they frequently were, enlightening. (That is something I learned from Moore, Wittgenstein and Austin, though I could have learned it from Sidgwick or Broad, though the latter does it rather pedantically and sometimes to excess.)

Quine, and later Sellars and Davidson, hove onto the scene. My ordinary language philosophy predilections and my convictions that Wittgenstein had dealt a death-blow to ideal language philosophy made me, I am now sorry to say, utterly unreceptive to that way of doing philosophy. I thought of it, say until about ten years ago, as a cluster of (philosophically speaking) reactionary steps turning the clock back, missing utterly the philosophical revolution Wittgenstein had made and even many of what I took to be the revolutionary advances made by the logical empiricists. Quine only muddied or pedanticized things with his use of logic. (*Methods of Logic* was one thing, *Word and Object* another.) And, or so I once thought, Grice and Strawson had utterly demolished that foolishness of not trying to draw a significant distinction between the analytic and synthetic.

So it seemed to me that analytical philosophy of the 60's and 70's had taken a retrograde turning and had utterly lost the insights of the Wittgensteinian revolution. The history of philosophy was studied in the same old way again, except that logical techniques were now used more frequently in the elucidation of the classical texts. There was an extensive preoccupation with the philosophy of logic and philosophy of language and Wittgenstein's philosophy of philosophy utterly dropped out and instead we wondered if we understood what "use" meant in Wittgenstein or we scholasticized the private argument. It was felt by not a few that it was no better to talk about use than to talk about meaning. *Perhaps* this concentration on the philosophy of logic and the philosophy of language helped us get clear about logic and language and (if there is such a thing) about the foundations of mathematics. But it helped us very little in thinking about distinctively philosophical problems. Philosophy of science (as distinct from the history of science) was similarly implicated and similarly moribund. Only the philosophy of mind seemed at

least to progress, though even there, in the hands of some, it turns arcane and small-scale, satisfying the passion of not a few philosophers to play around with puzzles. (Indeed, that seems to be the whole of it for some philosophers.)

Mainstream moral philosophy and social philosophy were similarly moribund, often drawing distinctions to no particular purpose and often doing little more than aping in the domain of the moral a once fashionable philosophy of language. (In meta-ethics you get the deployment of a philosophy of language of the previous decade.)

I tried in the early 60's, while also studying Stuart Hampshire's *Thought and Action*, to have a go at the then reigning Continentals. But, while I greatly admired and still do admire much of Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's political stances, and have sometimes found their political writings insightful, I found what Hare once called their big books impenetrable and replete with all the very kind of metaphysical nonsense that the logical empiricists rightly taught us to reject. (*Perhaps* there is good metaphysics as well as bad, but their sort of metaphysics is surely not it.) I am prepared to believe that their work here might with patience be de-mythologized. Moreover, I suspect that what they are trying to do is very important indeed, particularly when what they are trying to do is contrasted with the aims of the puzzle solvers, but their obscurity and indiscipline is so formidable that I for one do not have the stomach for the de-mythologization.

III

Two events occurred in the 60's, one external to philosophy and the other internal to its development, which had a considerable influence on philosophy. The first was the Vietnam War and the second was the publication in 1970 of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. The Vietnam War, and in particular the students' reactions to the war, forced philosophers to try to think in a hard way about political morality and political and social problems. This was most obvious in the United States but it held for us and for the Europeans as well.

We also came to see straight off that we were not very well equipped to do so. The most underdeveloped side of analytical philosophy was political philosophy. Moreover, its right hand, moral philosophy, had been so exclusively meta-ethical that philosophers found, though the spirit was often willing, that they in fact had very little to say. Even the kind of piecemeal social analysis that we are now accustomed to seeing in *Inquiry, Philosophy and Public Affairs*, and *Ethics* was something that had to be recreated. Sometimes we managed to say some things worthy of attention, but generally we lacked the ability that our Continental colleagues had to put them into a framework where we could see that these discrete analyses might add up to something and give us a broader understanding of social life and politics.

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* brought back to English speaking

philosophy the tradition of systematic and holistic socio-political philosophy. It was also the first book written in English on moral and political thought during the post-War era which received extensive attention outside of philosophy. It also gave us a sense of how we could systematically do moral and social philosophy with discipline and sophistication and how, as well, in doing so we could set aside questions of meta-ethics or the analysis of moral concepts. We didn't have to answer questions about the logical status of moral utterances, whether we could derive an ought from an is, whether and how moral utterances could be true or false, what was the meaning of "moral" or even of "justice" in order to pursue, even at a very fundamental level, moral and social theory. He also, both by the fiction of the original position and by his appeal to considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium, has given us an attractive consensus model of justification that will survive the death of foundationalism. This way of proceeding will also survive the rejection of Rawls's particular principles of justice, the recognition that an Archimedian point of the sort he seeks is not to be had and the realization that the contractarian method has a liberal bias and an unrealistic political sociology.

I have in various ways and in various places criticized Rawls but it also seems to me that he has shown us how philosophy and indeed social philosophy can forge ahead. (Nielsen, 1985.) His work is miles ahead of the orthodox linguistic analysis characteristic of Hare, Stevenson and Foot, but it is also a clear advance over the good reasons approach which in reality always remained too descriptive of the moral point of view.

Richard Rorty has said that, while Rawls's work is a considerable achievement, there is nothing distinctively philosophical about it. It could just as well have been written by an economist, a political scientist, a lawyer or the like. I think that that is an exaggeration, but there is merit in it all the same. Certainly, to have written A Theory of Justice would have taken an economist or political scientist who had a very extensive familarity, indeed, with the history of moral and social thought. There is also clearly in Rawls's work the mark of Quine's rejection of any substantial version of the analytic/synthetic distinction, Goodman's anti-foundationlist consensus model of justification and a philosophical sophistication concerning what proof could come to in philosophy. There is an understanding here that only a philosopher is likely to have. While an economist or a political scientist, unless she was philosophically sophisticated, would not be likely to have those conceptions in mind, still something very like them might well be implicit in her procedures so that the account she would construct might well be in substance very like Rawls's. That is to say, a Rawls-like structure could very well have been written by an economist or political scientist innocent of everything philosophical except the history of moral theory.

However, it is that that is behind Rorty's exaggeration. No analytic/ synthetic distinction is utilized by Rawls, in effect segregating philosophy and moral theory to the domain of conceptual analysis, no claim to any

distinctive *philosophical* knowledge is made (whatever that might mean) and no allegedly powerful philosophical analytical tools are appealed to as would have come natural to a Reichenbach, Quine or Dummett. There is nothing in Rawls's account, either in the actual substantive structure of his account or in its methodology, that is distinctively philosophical. Indeed, most of it is something which more likely could have come from someone with Marx's, Weber's or Durkheim's training than from someone trained like R.M. Hare, Peter Geach, John Searle, Gilbert Harman, or Phillipia Foot. (The Quine and Goodman things mentioned above are hardly distinctively philosophical.)

I think this turn of Rawls's, along with the demise of substantial versions of the analytic/synthetic distinction, the rejection of any appeal to the given, the undermining of correspondence theories of truth that go beyond Tarskian minimalism and the recognition of the unassailability of historicist claims about knowledge, give philosophy, now much less clearly distinct from the human sciences, the possibility of new directions. (I shall return to this in a moment.) But we also see again the depth and pervasiveness of the destruction of foundationalism in philosophy.

I am not very impressed by Richard Rorty's positive turns in philosophy and it does seem to me that what he says about both hermeneutics and truth is slapdash. But I do think he is substantially right in his remarks about the centrality of Wittgenstein and Dewey and about how Quine and Sellars led us to similar results from inside traditional analytical philosophy. That belief was reflected in my remarks in the previous paragraph. The core of Rorty's critique comes to an undermining of the whole classical enterprise of epistemology, the rejection of foundationalism and a non-platitudinous essentialism, the rejection of any belief that there could be any plausible inquiry bearing the title "the conceptual foundations" of so and so or any conceptual analysis which could give us the analysis of anything so that we could have some distinctive philosophical categories which would have some privileged place in the critique of culture, including the analysis of science, law, morality or common sense. Conceptual or linguistic analysis cannot deliver in the way that at least classic analytic philosophy thought it could, and the critique of culture that the various traditions of "perennial philosophy" thought they could achieve has also been decisively undermined. Wittgenstein, Dewey and (Rorty claims) Heidegger have so turned philosophy around. Where such a deep intellectual revolution has taken place, it is hardly surprising that we have been such a long time in seeing that this is what has happened. After all such changes are threatening to us and our defense mechanisms immediately go up. But I do think Rorty has correctly narrated the history of what I, and many others, intuitively felt that Wittgenstein had done with swift, bold, ironic strokes, when we first read him and what Dewey earlier did in a different way and in a very different idiom. (Perhaps what made me so receptive to Wittgenstein was the very deep impact the reading of Dewey had made on me when I was an undergraduate and how in some

muted way it survived the impact of logical empiricism and linguistic analysis.)

But when Rorty goes positive he gets both slap-dash and too effete. There is too much a shrug of the shoulders, anything goes, attitude. As an attitude about how to structure universities in our cultural context that is fine, but, as a procedure about what kind of conversation of mankind philosophy should try to be, it is a cop-out. But what then can we do after the demise of logical empiricism and programatic linguistic analysis? Can there be anything like the recovery in philosophy that Dewey sought? Perhaps not, perhaps philosophy is doomed to become an increasingly marginal discipline as the de-mystification of the world proceeds apace. It could become simply a narrow specialist's inquiry. If someone wants to know about deontic logic of rigid designators, it could deliver up answers. But unless such considerations can be put in a wider context, it just is a specialist's inquiry.

Perhaps philosophy is not so utterly doomed to become just somebody's little speciality. (You do kidney transplants. I do deontic logic.) Dewey, famously, said that philosophy begins to recover when the problems of men become the problems of philosophers and Rawls, eschewing the techniques of linguistic analysis, and utilizing all kinds of empirical claims (including claims from the social sciences), constructed in a reasonably rigorous way a holistic moral theory that not only characterized our moral capacities but made, in a systematic way, normative claims that were closely linked with social theory.

Still, if we can get something more than what Rawls gives us that doesn't turn into obscurantism or ideology, we, if we believe in the possibility of this move, will believe that Rawls's theory is too much just descriptive of our moral capacities. We want, if such a thing is possible, a moral and social theory that can produce a critique of culture, a critique of society, and a critique of ideology. It should, as well, be somehow a descriptive-explanatory-interpretive account. It should enable us to come to better understand who we are, who we were and who we might possibly become. But it should also have a critical-emancipatory thrust. It should help us to see more adequately who we might better become and what kind of a society would not only be a more just society, but also, since justice is not the whole of social assessment, a more truly human society. Beyond that, such a theory should help us as well to better understand the mechanics for the achievement of those things. It should not only paint a picture of human emancipation; it should as well give us at least a nascent theory of such a society, namely something which in general terms describes what such a society should look like, explains how it could come to be and sustain itself and gives a justification of the claim that such a society is indeed a better society and indeed a society that could rightly be called a truly human society. Perhaps, as the logical empiricist and linguistic philosophers thought, nobody can possibly pull off anything like this. Neither philosophy nor anything else which would be reasonably clear-headed ought to aspire to such heights.

Surely such aspirations run well beyond anything that Rawls has. He gives us an account of our moral capacities and provides a rationale for liberalism and for our traditional democracies, but he does not go beyond that to provide a critique of culture or an all out defense against alternatives to liberal society. He gives a rationale for liberal Welfare state capitalism, but he does not show it to be superior to Marxism or anarchism or for that matter to a reflective elitism and the societies that go with these conceptions. It is some assessment here of what we could say one way or another that we should like to have if we could get it.

If Rorty is roughly right in his critique of an epistemologically based philosopher's self-image, we cannot get it from a foundationalist's social theory. We can no more go the route of *moral* epistemology's foundationalist quest than we can take an epistemological turn more generally. We can't go the way of Price, Hume or Hägerström.

I think, however, that there is another route that might conceivably pay off if it were really tried. It is a route Rorty utterly ignores for all his sensitivity to alternatives. Let me state it indirectly. Both in our time and in the late Nineteenth Century, the great synthesizing and interpretative accounts of our social life which were once done by philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Smith, Condercet, Hume, Kant and Hegel came to be done by holistic social scientists such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim. What we once got from *Leviathan* we now get from them. We get a holistic interpretive-explanatory-critical account of society. It will, Max Weber's official *wertfrei* stance to the contrary notwithstanding, be descriptive, explanatory and critically normative.

What exactly we are trying to do in doing these things in a holistic theory is not clear. We have to build the ship while we are aboard by both doing this kind of theorizing and, at the same time, reflectively assessing, or at least pondering on, what it is we are doing. The social sciences are shot through with not only obscurity but with distorting ideology and, not infrequently, ideological apologetic, sometimes apparent and deliberate, more frequently and more insidiously hidden and unwitting. Yet, it is these human sciences that tell us, if anything tells us, who we are, were and who we might hopefully and reasonably become.

What is vital to see is that here we have something that cuts across many standard conceptualizations of disciplines, including philosophy and sociology. There is room here for, among other things, the traditional analytic underlaborer conception of philosophy, for sometimes what needs to be done with historically powerful theories, either before or as we go on constructing new critical theories as our own alternatives to the classical theories, is to do what G.A. Cohen brilliantly does for Marx and Charles Taylor for Hegel. (Cohen, 1978; Taylor, 1975 and 1979.) We need, that is, to present a rational reconstruction of a historically influential and important work that might plausibly be believed to contain more than a modicum of truth. There we will be presenting a tidier version of the classical version. And there classical style clarifications are perfectly in order: techniques for drawing relevant

distinctions by noting ambiguities, possibilities, finding more perspicuous formulations and the like. Here we take a leaf from the practices of Broad, Wittgenstein, and Austin, but it mainly comes to being very sensitive about the workings of our language and Rorty is dead right in saying against Reichenbach that in doing this we should not claim that we have at hand, are on the verge of getting or needing, any powerful analytical tools. (Rorty, 1982.) What we need is a good understanding of the theory we are reconstructing, as well as the alternatives to it and a fine ability to draw distinctions rooted in our natural languages. We do indeed assemble reminders for a particular purpose. Here Cohen's practice in analyzing and critiquing Marx is very revealing. It brilliantly translates into the concrete what I have just been talking about. (Cohen, 1982; pp. 195–221.)

However, philosophy, done in the mode I am advocating, wants to do something more as part of a systematic critical theory. But what that will come to is not clear. I think, following Quine here and not Wittgenstein, that we should just proceed, using whatever is at hand, and trying to be as clear as we reasonably can, with holistic social theory construction which we, in turn, repeatedly relate to an at least putatively emancipatory practice without worrying overly whether what we are doing is philosophy, sociology, economics, social history, social criticism or whatever. Worry about whether what we are saying is true, well warranted, important, how it connects with other things we are saying, and the like. But do not ask if it is philosophy and do not ask, a la Wittgenstein in the last part of the *Investigations*, if our remarks are grammatical remarks and thus properly philosophical. Ask, instead, if they are tolerably clear, if there are good grounds for believing them, and whether, if true, they are important — particularly for giving us a grip on who we are, were and who we are to become. If we can do something like that with some tolerable rigor we will plainly have done something worthwhile. Whether we want to go on to call it philosophy will not matter at all. *If* it is not philosophy, it is something more important than philosophy that ought to replace philosophy's traditional cultural role. But I also do not see why we should not say that it is a central element in philosophy: what philosophy should be when it gets reconstructed.

University of Calgary
2500 University Drive, N.W.
Calgary, Canada. T2N 1N4

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