

PHILOSOPHY AS CRITICAL THEORY*

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I

In speaking of the future of philosophy I am not trying to make any predictions. 'Philosophy', like 'science', is not the name of a natural kind. A glance at an APA or a CPA program or the program of a World Congress in Philosophy makes it evident how many very diverse things go on under the aegis of philosophy with nothing unplatitudinous standing there in virtue of which we could classify them all as the same or even basically similar activities. Some of us will regard some of these activities with a not inconsiderable irony and, for a few of them, some few of us will hardly think of them as genuine philosophy at all. They may indeed, for a few of us, even be the object of our disdain. What will be left of that motley in a hundred years is anyone's guess. Moreover, and similarly, what will be at the centre of the institutional design of those activities that will then be taken to be the core of philosophy will, it is not unreasonable to surmise, look very different from what it is now in a hundred years. But, not aspiring to prophecy, I will not hazard a guess at what philosophy will be then.

I shall be concerned instead with the normative and critical task of characterizing how I think philosophy should deeply transform itself. Indeed the transformation, in my view, should be so extensive, make such a shift away from the dominant tradition, that some will believe that what I am proposing is really a successor subject to philosophy and not philosophy. My response is that within certain limits I couldn't care less what we call things here, though it is important to me that the direction I favor for philosophy in the future should have genuine links to some central activities that have been taken to be philosophy in the past. There are, I believe, such links.

What is important, beyond correct verbalization, is to ascertain whether my substantive points are near to the mark, for, if they are, systematic analytic philosophy and the metaphysical traditions of Continental philosophy are both exhausted. If that is so, perhaps, where we take philosophy to be some kind of professional discipline, we should just close up shop. That, of course, is about as likely as it is likely that

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North American universities, under fiscal constraints, will unburden themselves of their swollen administrative structures. But I am trying to address myself to what it would be most reasonable to do.

Philosophy, at least in the foreseeable future, is not going to wither away. No matter what we who make our living teaching philosophy do or think, there is a kind of folk-conception of philosophy that will live on. I speak here of philosophy in the broad sense where it is conceived not as a distinctive kind of discipline, the property of a professional caste, but as an attempt on the part of human beings to make sense of their lives, both individually and collectively, and to come to see, if we can, what, in our time and place, and with the live possibilities before us, would be the best sorts of lives to live, including what forms of community would be most desirable and to see this normative picture in turn in the larger framework of how things hang together. Philosophy, on this understanding, is as old as the hills, hardly the property of a profession or discipline and not in the least threatened. In that unproblematic way we just are philosophical animals. But in that way E.M. Forster and Doris Lessing are more clearly philosophers than are David Armstrong and Saul Kripke, and that should be sufficient to indicate that the profession has something rather more determinate in mind when it speaks of philosophy.

My claim is (1) that the major traditions supported by the profession are exhausted and (2) that even so, philosophy need not just close up shop but can and should transform itself.

I shall be somewhat briefer with my nay-saying, tradition-bashing, side, both because I have had a go at it elsewhere and because I believe in essentials that Richard Rorty has made the right points about the tradition in spinning the tale he has about the story of modern and contemporary philosophy, though his recipes for 'post-philosophy philosophy' are something else again.¹ For me to go on at length about how the tradition rests on a mistake would, for the most part, be simply to cover much of the same ground again. If Rorty is substantially wrong here in his setting aside of the tradition (more accurately the traditions) then I am mistaken as well. Even then my proposals about the transformation of philosophy might still be well-taken, but more modestly, as proposing an additional something philosophy might come to be.

So the link between my yea-saying and my nay-saying is not all that tight. You might, of course, want to reject both, but it is also possible to take one and leave the other. However, my claim will be that, while the tradition should come to an end, philosophy need not come to an end with it and 'post-philosophy philosophy' need not be limited to a learned and witty kibitzing. We can and should transform philosophy into some form of critical social theory with an emancipatory intent. I am not suggesting just a replay of Habermas or the Frankfurt school

or some more orthodox version of Marxism. I shall, after my nay-saying, give a characterization of what I have in mind and begin building a defense of taking that turning.

II

Why should we set aside the tradition? The tradition is either foundationalist or lives in a timid shadow of foundationalism. But foundationalism in any significant form rests on a mistake. Nor is there much point in the various attempts to ‘naturalize’ metaphysics or epistemology. Scientific realism is not any great advance over Platonism or Thomism. It just has a rather more scientific jargon.

A not inconsiderable number of very diverse philosophers, some of rather major importance, would assent to Isaac Levi’s comment that “opposition to foundationalism ought to be the philosophical equivalent of resistance to sin.”² Moreover, with that anti-foundationalism goes as well anti-representationalism and opposition to glassy essences. And this, in turn, if we think the matter through, comes to a rejection of the whole Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition of epistemology, the essentially Platonic tradition of metaphysics in its many disguises, the ideal language and reductionist accounts of logical positivism, ‘scientific empiricism’ with its commitment to ‘an empiricist language’ and, as well, so-called scientific realism with its commitment to a correspondence theory of truth and some kind of ‘scientific metaphysics’.

Opposition to these various voices of foundationalism comes not only from the classical pragmatists and from Wittgenstein, Wisdom and Waismann, it has emerged, as well, internally to analytic philosophy itself, from the pragmatization of positivism in Quine, Goodman and Sellars and from the work of such (comparatively speaking) younger-generation analytical philosophers as Putnam and Davidson, to say nothing of such apostates to the analytical tradition as Rorty, Taylor and MacIntyre. On the Continental side, in a different way and in a different idiom, the rejection has been as thorough. In France I refer to Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida and in Germany, to Heidegger, Gadamer, Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas, Wellmer and Blumberg.

All of these philosophers in their sometimes rather different ways may, of course, be mistaken, and foundationalism could still be alive and well and living in North America. But the list is rather impressive, containing many of the luminaries of contemporary philosophy, and that should give the foundationalist, or the foundationally inclined person, pause. Perhaps all of these philosophers are merely caught up in the vicissitudes of the *Weltgeist*. It would not be the first time that has happened in history. But the burden of proof is surely on foundationalists to show that something like that is true.

However, not to just call in the big battalions but to argue, I need first to characterize foundationalism. Foundationalism is a philosophical account which seeks to isolate, by some kind of philosophical method, a set of basic beliefs which are foundational to all the rest of the things that we may justifiably claim to know or reasonably believe. Classical foundationalism holds that the only properly basic beliefs are those that are self-evident, incorrigible reports of experience or are evident to the senses. On such an account, other beliefs can be rationally held only if they are supported either deductively or inductively by such properly basic beliefs. Aside from anything else, for reasons purely internal to the framework, such a classical form of foundationalism would appear at least to be self-refuting for the very proposition asserting what classical foundationalism is, is, on the one hand, neither self-evident, evident to the senses or an incorrigible report of experience nor, on the other, deducible from such propositions or inductively justified by them. In fine, classical foundationalism hoists itself by its own petard.

There are more modest forms of foundationalism around, but they are hardly more successful. Suppose our modest foundationalism claims that a belief is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident, fundamental, evident to the senses or defensible by argument, careful deliberation or inquiry. We are troubled right off by the undefined use of 'fundamental' so crucially and conveniently used here. The modest foundationalist obligingly helps us by telling us that a belief can correctly be said to be fundamental if it is unavoidably part of the noetic structure of every human being and could not be abandoned without causing havoc to that structure. We can then—and indeed we should—wonder how we decide which beliefs are unavoidably part of the noetic structure of every human being and cannot be set aside without playing havoc with that structure. Examples readily come to mind: 'The Earth has existed for many years past', 'The sun comes up in the morning', 'Dogs cannot fly', 'Human beings need food and sleep' and the like. But how do we determine what gets on the list? Modest foundationalists provide us with no criterion. If, G.E. Moore-like, we just *ambulando* have to decide in particular instances what on common sense reflection seems fundamental or basic to us, then we hardly need foundationalism or indeed philosophy or critical theory to provide us with a foundation for belief, a critical canon for assessing the rest of culture. Rather, we just use our reflective common sense to decide what is or is not fundamental. Philosophy then becomes quite superfluous. If, alternatively, we relativize what is taken to be fundamental or properly basic to whatever a given community takes to be fundamental or basic, so that, like Alvin Plantinga, we allow such tendentious beliefs as 'God spoke to me' or 'God protects us' as basic, then we lose any possible advantage that a foundational epistemological or metaphysical tradition might have that would make it intellec-

tually attractive. Instead of affording us a basis for criticizing the idols of the tribe, we refer to the idols of the tribe quite uncritically to determine what is basic or fundamental. This is surely a *reductio* of a foundationalist turn.

Besides such internal arguments, anti-foundationalists press home less internal objections, smoke out very problematic presuppositions of both foundationalists and their scientific opponents (opponents who unwittingly take in their dirty linen) and offer alternative accounts of how we can justify various of our beliefs that give far fewer hostages to fortune. Anti-foundationalists, for example, deny that we can make epistemological sense of the idea of an experiential input as a theory-free basis of alternative interpretive or explanatory theories, some of which give us radically different conceptualizations of this experiential given, which is just there to be noted or discovered and then conceptualized. In attacking such a position, anti-foundationalists reject the hallowed putative distinction, dear to the tradition, between conceptual scheme and reality, or scheme (schema) and content, with all the possibilities built into that traditional philosophical way of conceptualizing things for radical scepticism or for conceptual relativism.³ But here, as John Wisdom used to put it, it is the manner and not the matter that mystifies. Indeed, the coherence of such a distinction, and of any conceptual relativism rooted in it, is very much in doubt.

The foundationalist must show how correct ideas can match up with an external reality or (where she takes a linguistic turn) how words can hook onto the world and how true propositions must correspond to some antecedently-given reality and false ones fail to. But no one has ever been able to give a perspicuous account of such a correspondence or to cash in any of the above metaphors. We have, of course, Tarski and his semantical theory of truth; but that is a long way from a correspondence theory. Talk of correspondence here is just a mystification, and talk of mind as a mirror of nature or of language as a map faithfully representing nature has been shown to be a non-starter.⁴

Reference is not fixed by meaning. What a term refers to is determined not by mental states or intentions but, first, by paradigmatic examples established in some historically extant linguistic community in which the term in question has a use and, second, by historical causal connections that obtain in the extralinguistic world. Nature does not have her own language permitting us to claim correctly, or even coherently, that the “the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects” and that “there is exactly one true and complete description of the world.”⁵ There is, in Putnam’s phrase, no God’s-eye point of view of the relation between words and the world. A commitment to clarity requires that we come to see such a representational model as a myth and that we finally break the powerful hold it has had on us. We

cannot as neutral agents and observers of the actual disengage ourselves from the world by objectifying it, that is, by making it the object of accurate representations. We can as embodied social agents acting and interacting with the other parts of the world cope with the world successfully or not, and frequently we use language in doing so. But there is no word-world relation such that words simply represent the world as it is. Language does not in that way hook onto the world. Indeed the very idea of Language being something apart from the world to hook onto the world is a weird conception.

It is surely not unnatural to respond: well, perhaps foundationalism has been shown to rest on a mistake, but what about naturalistic metaphysics and naturalized epistemology? And are those not part of the tradition too? Naturalized epistemology, making no foundational claims, seeks to explain or account for our beliefs solely in terms of the natural processes which give rise to them. As both Putnam and Rorty point out, this is a very peculiar conception of epistemology indeed, for it does not explain when beliefs are justified but seeks instead to explain how certain psychological or physiological processes work. But it is not that question but the *justifiability* question—the question of how we are to justify our beliefs—that is the very *raison d'être* of epistemology. Indeed it is hard to understand how such an inquiry as the one Quine characterizes could even be regarded as a bit of philosophy, rather than an abandonment of epistemology for psychology.⁶

It is important to recognize how radical Rorty's critique actually is. In attacking metaphysical philosophy from Plato to scientific realism, the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition of epistemologically-oriented philosophy as well as systematic analytic philosophy, Rorty rejects the very self-image the tradition has of itself and without which it has little, if any, point. It is an illusion, he is telling us, to pretend as the tradition does that philosophy is or can become a distinct discipline with a distinctive methodology, which if properly employed will at long last enable us to discover the foundations of science and the life-world. There is no strictly philosophical account that will finally enable us correctly to see how things hang together and to make sense of our lives, or at least more reasonably to orient our lives. The promise is that it will, if we finally carry it through successfully, provide us with some philosophical understanding of a very general and fundamental sort which will enable us, free of the vicissitudes of culture and history, to in some comprehensive way understand our social life and to criticize our various forms of life, institutions and ordinary and scientific ways of knowing and doing. We will, it is claimed, finally come to know and to understand, if we can only get the right philosophical accounting of things, in a way no one has ever been able to know or understand before. It all sounds a little too much like a religious conversion, but still it is, put now bluntly and embarrassingly, the deep underlying rationale of the tradition.

In reality we neither have nor can have anything like that. We have instead concepts such as truth, goodness, rationality, knowledge and the like which *ambulando* we have some mastery of (we know how to use the terms correctly), and in that way have some understanding of them. That is to say, in our mother tongue, and perhaps in some other historically determinate tongues as well, we can use terms expressive of these concepts in most of the ordinary, context-bound, historically determinate settings of their use to say what we want to say. And we also understand something, at least in a working way, of the contexts of their proper employment. But we have no ahistorical, context-independent criteria of rationality, reasonableness, knowledge, goodness or truth with which to construct a philosophical discipline that transcends history or to adumbrate a permanent, culture-transcendent, and impartial matrix for assessing all forms of inquiry and all types of knowledge. We philosophers do not possess such 'super-concepts', or such a super-understanding of concepts, and we do not possess a secure matrix of heuristic concepts or categories which would enable us to classify, comprehend and criticize our forms of life. We have neither a philosophical architectonic nor an Archimedean point here, and it is unclear what it would be like to have one or even to have a good understanding of what we are talking about here. And we are also without any privileged, special philosophical knowledge (assuming we know what that is) of concepts, and again it is anything but clear what it would be like to have such a knowledge.

III

Recognition of the illusion behind the tradition undercuts any appeal to a conception of the role of the philosopher as underlaborer. That surely is not apparent, but—or so I shall argue—that conception is itself undermined with the undermining of foundationalism and 'metaphysical realism'.

The underlaborer's conception of philosophy goes well with a commitment to a type of analytic philosophy that has no systematic pretensions but is content instead to dispel conceptual confusions emerging out of everyday life and science.⁷ We are to do this, it is often claimed, with the aid of sharp new analytical tools that philosophy as conceptual or logical analysis provides.

If what I have said so far is close to the mark, we must give up a number of once popular metaphors and give up hoping for what they suggest. Philosophy cannot be the overseer of culture, the adjudicator of knowledge-claims, and it cannot usher the sciences to their proper places and demarcate them from the rest of culture. It cannot—to put the matter very broadly—be the arbiter of culture, distinguishing between what is rational or reasonable and what is irrational or unreasonable to believe and do.

However, the protagonists of the underlaborer conception might respond that all is not lost, for there is another less arrogant metaphor for the philosopher's work. The philosopher should, on this new conception, help keep us all honest. Where she is doing her job properly, according to the new metaphor, she is the inspector of finance of the academy. Welling out of our everyday life—moral and political lives, the arts and the sciences, and intramural relations between them—are all sorts of conceptual confusions, some of them very distorting and harmful indeed.⁸ The role of the philosopher, the underlaborer conception of philosophy has it, is to dispel confusion over our concepts in their living settings and to enable us, in these determinate contexts, to come to command a sufficiently clear view of the workings of our language to dispel such perplexities.

This commitment to clarity is salutary and I do not want to denigrate it. Our very intellectual integrity requires that we must strive for and practice such clarity when we philosophize. Yet this metaphor still gives the philosopher the illusion of having an expertise and a technique that she does not have. Eager analytical philosophers have spoken of our having powerful new analytical tools to use in solving or dissolving philosophical perplexities, finally in a rigorous, scientific manner.⁹ However, when we look at the matter carefully we will come to see that there are in reality no such powerful analytical techniques that the philosopher can deploy to solve either the problems of philosophers or for that matter the problems of life, or even to break, in a therapeutic manner, philosophical perplexity. No distinctive philosophical method enjoys anything even approximating a consensus, even among Anglo-American analytical philosophers. There is not even, as Rorty puts it, an inter-university paradigm within North America.¹⁰ The new tools rapidly become obsolete, and there is a lot of coming and going of intellectual fashion. Indeed, in this respect things seem to be speeding up. The whirligig goes ever faster, but no one outside philosophy departments pays it any attention. There is little to encourage a belief in progress toward a clearer view of things, setting philosophy on the secure path of science or something science-like and cumulative. What needs to be shown, and hasn't been shown by the defenders of the underlaborer conception, is *how* it is that philosophers have some special expertise with concepts such that they will be better able than others to resolve the conceptual problems that arise in science and in the life-world. The belief that we have anything like this appears to be a piece of philosophical mythology.

It is nevertheless true that philosophers with a good analytic training have a developed capacity for drawing distinctions, spotting assumptions, digging out unclarities, seeing relationships between propositions, noting their implications and setting out arguments perspicuously. But so

have lawyers, classicists, economists and mathematicians with a good training. These different disciplines use different jargon, but there is no reason to believe that the philosophers' jargon, a jargon which repeatedly changes, is in general any better. We have, as Wittgenstein has powerfully argued, no conception of 'absolute clarity' in virtue of which we could judge that one or another of these ways of speaking affords the most perspicuous representation or (whatever that means) puts us closest to reality.¹¹

The shock of the matter, for philosophers at least, is that philosophers cannot tell us what makes our ideas really clear, what we really mean or what we are justified in believing.¹² To make good the underlaborer undertaking, we philosophers would have to be able to display a philosophical expertise that was distinct from and an improvement on just having a cultivated ability, shared with a goodly number of non-philosophers, to think clearly—an ability which could be cultivated in a number of different ways. A philosopher must be able to show us how we can distinguish clear ideas from unclear ones and to show us how we can distinguish sense from nonsense. But we have very good reasons indeed to believe that we philosophers cannot deliver the goods here. We may in certain contexts (say, with respect to certain kinds of metaphysical talk) be able to assemble reminders which will flush out some rather disguised nonsense; but that is quite distinct from having a general criterion or a special expertise.

In general I have in these first sections tried to argue against the tradition. It is my belief that Putnam is right in holding that the tradition is in shambles.¹³ This is particularly evident with foundationalism, but it is also true of non-foundationalist analytic philosophy too. Again the words of Putnam capture what I have been arguing. He remarks that "at the very moment when analytical philosophy is recognized as the 'dominant movement' in world philosophy, analytical philosophy has come to the end of its own project—the dead end, not the completion."¹⁴ There is a tendency among analytic philosophers to see analytic philosophy as philosophy itself. But that is just a conceit. If it is at a dead end, as Putnam, Rorty and I believe, is there anything left for philosophy to be with the demise of the tradition? That is the topic I shall pursue in the next section.

IV

Suppose we see philosophy as social critique or as cultural criticism. If neo-Pragmatist critiques of the tradition are well taken, we may not be able in general to say anything very enlightening about what meaning, truth, knowledge, belief or rationality is, but we can—or so the claim goes—come to grips, as have philosophers throughout history, with the

pressing problems of life.¹⁵ For us, standing where we are now, this means examining the problems of abortion, euthanasia, privacy, pornography, the rights of children, animal rights, sexism, racism, nuclear warfare, the ideological uses of science and the media, exploitation, and imperialism. Our questions concern what democracy can come to in our industrial societies, what education should be at various levels in our societies, inequality and autonomy, the choice between socialism and capitalism or reform and revolution, and the ethics of terrorism. At other places and at other times, different questions have come to the fore, and the agenda no doubt will be different in the future. These questions certainly are not the perennial questions of philosophy, if indeed there are any perennial questions.¹⁶ But there is here, so the claim runs, real work for philosophy to do in examining them intelligently, in using, as Dewey used to say, our creative intelligence.¹⁷

However, problems that we have discussed before come flooding back like the return of the repressed. How can philosophers as philosophers be of any use here? They might, if they are also reflective, knowledgeable and intelligent persons, have something useful to say, but how does their being philosophers help? If foundationalism is out, moral foundationalism is out, so we cannot expect much help here from the classical ethical theories.¹⁸ There seems to be left no distinctive expertise that philosophers can bring to such pressing human questions.

I want to suggest that there may be a way that philosophy might transform itself in a way that would answer to our unschooled reflective hopes. It would involve (a) giving up all pretensions to autonomy and instead interlocking philosophy fully with the human sciences and (b) taking the resolution of the problems of human life to be very centrally a part of philosophy's reason for being.¹⁹

What I want can be seen by going back to the non-discipline-based folk conception of philosophy I mentioned initially, whose continued existence is not threatened whatever philosophers may do. Quite unprofessionally, I construed philosophy as an attempt on the part of human beings to make sense of their lives and to come to see, as far as that is possible, what, in our time and place, with whatever real possibilities we have before us, would be the best sorts of lives for us to live, including what forms of community would be most desirable, and in turn to place this normative picture in a larger framework of how things hang together.

Taking this folk conception of philosophy as our benchmark, I want to see if something serving the same ends and with the same overall rationale, but more rigorous, more argument-based and more discipline-oriented, could be articulated and then developed. I shall call it *philosophy-as-critical-theory*. I so label it with a certain amount of trepidation, lest it be identified with the critical theory of either Habermas or the

earlier Frankfurt school. While I am indebted in certain ways to the German critical theorists, particularly to Habermas, I do not model my conception on their accounts, though I deliberately adopt their phrase 'critical theory'.²⁰

What I am advocating in advocating philosophy-as-critical-theory is a holistic social theory which is at once a descriptive-explanatory social theory, an interpretive social theory and a normative critique. Departing radically from the philosophical tradition, it will be an empirical theory.²¹ Elements of the social sciences will be a very central part, although, in light of the importance of giving a narrative account of who we were, are and might become, much of the social science utilized may be historiographical.²²

On such a conception, elements of philosophy as more traditionally conceived, particularly elements of analytical philosophy, will be coordinated with the human sciences, with none of the elements claiming hegemony and with philosophy unequivocally giving up all claim to be the autonomous guardian of reason.

Critical theory will, of course, share the fallibilist attitudes of science and of pragmatism. An underlying rationale for the construction of such a comprehensive holistic theory is to provide a comprehensive critique of culture and society and of ideology. In this way it will not only have both a descriptive-explanatory thrust and an interpretive side but a critically normative emancipatory thrust as well. If such a theory can really be fleshed out in a coherent and convincing manner, it will not only help us better see who we were, are and might become; where there are alternatives, it will also help us see who we might *better* become and what kind of a society would be not only more just but a more humane society conducive to human flourishing.

Such a theory will probably have a narrative structure, but it will not be a meta-narrative—a grand *a prioristic* philosophy of history—but a genuinely empirical-cum-theoretical theory with appropriate empirical testing constraints.²³ It will, among other things, be a descriptive-explanatory theory showing us the structure of society, the range of its feasible transformations and the mechanics or modalities of its transformation. The normative side will provide, with the degree of contextuality appropriate, a rational justification (if that isn't pleonastic) for saying, of the various possible transformations, which are the better.

It is not the case that the Frankfurt School and Habermas provide us with our only paradigms. Dewey and Mead, among our near contemporaries have done something like that, and in the past Vico, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Condorcet, Hume, Ferguson, Herder, and Hegel—in various ways, with various styles of reasoning and various techniques of historical narrative—have also done something like that. Under the dominance of the Cartesian-Kantian epistemological and metaphysical tradition, taking

its linguistic turn with logical positivism and later analytical philosophy, such approaches were set aside as at best not being philosophy and at worst as incoherent.

Yet critical theory lived on and attained its best articulations to date, again in various ways, in the great sociological trinity of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, as well as in such lesser lights as Pareto, Mosca, Gramsci and, in a somewhat different way, Freud. Critical theory is a definite project of modernity, growing out of the Enlightenment. It is presently under vigorous post-modernist attack from Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Rorty, though the latter two have not abandoned the ideals of the Enlightenment but have rather chastened it in the spirit of pragmatism.²⁴

There is the legitimate worry on the part of these post-modernists that critical theory might come to nothing but a grandiose and rather vacuous grand theory with a meta-narrative—a totalizing philosophy of history without empirical or critical grounding. That is not an unreasonable worry, and one need not be a Popperian to have it. We certainly need to have a better understanding of how the elements of a critical theory go together and of the devices within the theory, not only to critique ideology but to guard against ideological distortion in the theory itself. There is the pervasive phenomenon of only seeing ideology in the other. Charles Taylor is surely right in seeing ideology as something which is very pervasive indeed and in seeing, as well, such grand accounts as ideology-prone.²⁵ But that they are ideology-prone does not mean they are inescapably ideological. We want a genuinely critical theory with an emancipatory thrust as free as possible from ideological distortion, and not just a distorting ideology with a grand meta-narrative.

For a critical theory not to come to that it must meet four conditions: (a) it must be seen to be clearly of help in solving some of what Dewey called the problems of men, problems like the more or less determinate social problems I described; (b) it must develop a theoretical practice that has a clear emancipatory pay-off; (c) its descriptive-explanatory structure must actually provide some explanations which are approximately true; and (d) these explanations, together with the evaluative and normative claims contained in the theoretical practice, must compose a well-matching, interlocking, comprehensive framework which is perspicuously articulated.

Even post-Modernists sympathetic to the Enlightenment project such as Foucault and Rorty will be sceptical, as many others will as well, about the scope of critical theory. It is a very daunting enterprise. Critics may grant that such a project is not *a priori* impossible or incoherent, but they will instead (a) be sceptical that we can construct a theory with such a scope which will be able to meet demands that will reasonably be put on it (such as the four listed above) and (b) reject the philosophical accoutrements that they perceive as being an essential part of

critical theory, namely some ahistorical, non-contextual, non-social-practice-dependent theory of rationality, truth, warranted belief, or undistorted discourse. These post-modernists are as sceptical about this as they are of foundationalist epistemologies or of metaphysics. They will point out, perfectly correctly, that we can recognize what it is rational or reasonable to do without having any inkling of a theory of rationality or any account of what it is to be reasonable, and likewise we can perfectly well distinguish true statements from false ones without having a theory of what truth is or any general criteria for when beliefs are justified.²⁶ And similar things can and should be said about our capacities to recognize in concrete situations what we ought to do even without any theory of morality, either normative or meta-ethical.²⁷

In what are probably its best current exemplifications (exemplifications which are themselves quite different), namely, in the critical theory of Habermas and his associates and in analytical Marxism, philosophy-as-critical-theory does have such general conceptions of rationality, truth and knowledge, though this is clearer in Habermas than in analytical Marxism.²⁸ This *may* be a good thing and it *may*, as Habermas believes, allow critical theory to transcend relativism and historicism.²⁹ But then again it may not, and criticisms such as those of Rorty and Hacking may carry the day, and philosophical supplements from Putnam or Davidson may not provide the rationale for transcending such rather more historicized accounts.³⁰ Moreover, if Rorty's arguments are well-taken, a critical theory would not need such supplementation.

While the present exemplars of critical theory go in this standard Enlightenment direction in this respect, and they may be right to do so, I do not believe that such an account need be part of the core conception of what a critical theory must be—it need not be part of the very idea of a critical theory of society. A critical theory could be far more historicist than Habermas's account or Horkheimer's and still remain a critical theory.

I am not here imputing a critical theory to Rorty or Foucault, who are much too leery of theories for that. But someone with the metaphysical beliefs of Rorty (what Foucault's are is less clear) and with Rorty's endorsement of reflective equilibrium could very readily come, without a lapse in consistency or coherence, to construct a historicized version of a critical theory.³¹ It could not have the relativism (unacknowledged) or the commitment to incommensurability of Rorty's earlier work. But in two late important essays, he constructs an account that takes him beyond relativism without falling into some form of transcendentalist Absolutism or indeed any Absolutism.³²

Whether an adequate critical theory must have, as a component part, a *theory* of truth, rationality and knowledge, as Habermas, Putnam and Taylor believe it should, or whether it could and should bracket such

considerations, as Rorty and Foucault think, is not a matter to be settled *a priori* or on methodological grounds alone but historically. Alternative theories must be fleshed out to see which account works best or meets the four conditions I have described.

However, if a critical theory is to have any bite, if it is to be a *critical* theory, it cannot issue in what is clearly some form of relativism. I agree with Hacking and MacIntyre that we should take relativism seriously, and I further agree with them that there are plausible forms of it not flattened by Davidson's transcendental argument.³³ I further agree with MacIntyre that we are not likely to be able to refute relativism, though we may be able to provide accounts of society and morality that are more plausible than even the best relativistic ones.

Historicist accounts like Rorty's clearly show that historicism need not add up to relativism.³⁴ Rorty's ethnocentric starting point in the considered convictions of Enlightenment bourgeois individualism does not entrap him in his own starting point. He could, that is, work his way out of his bourgeois individualism. Moreover, he would hardly be anchored to the moral world or to any community if he did not start with some relatively specific considered judgements, some 'prejudices' in Burke's sense. However, in shuttling back and forth to get them into a coherent pattern, none of these starting points are taken to be sacrosanct. We repair, and indeed can even rebuild, the ship at sea. Nothing is beyond amendment or even rejection, though not everything can be rejected at once. In gaining ever more coherent views, where we fit together ever more comprehensively our reflective beliefs in many domains, rejecting those that square badly with most of our most secure beliefs, we come incrementally to gain a more adequate understanding and a more reasonable set of moral commitments.

Critical theory should add, as an integral methodological component, the method of wide reflective equilibrium linked with some pragmatist methodological addenda taken from Isaac Levi.³⁵ It is a way of proceeding introduced by Goodman and Quine and later explicitly applied to moral theory by Rawls, English, Daniels and myself, then again developed in a more generalized form by Putnam and Rorty.³⁶

We start with the considered judgements of whatever cultural traditions happen to be socialized into our marrow.³⁷ We seek first to eliminate those which cannot square with a fair appraisal of the facts, would not be held in a cool hour and when we are not fatigued, drunk, under strain or the like. We also seek to get a consistent set of such winnowed considered judgements, eliminating one or another of whatever conflicting judgements remain by seeing which of them adheres best with our other considered judgements background beliefs, and more generalized factual assessments. We consider which of the considered judgements, when we are aware that they conflict, would continue to have the strongest appeal

when we take them to heart and agonize over which to stick with. (It is folly to think that in the domain of the moral we can bypass all appeal to sentiment.³⁸)

Getting such an initial set (perhaps cluster would be the better word), we try to construct general principles or see if there are extant in our tradition general principles which will account for our holding them and interpret them. (These principles may themselves be higher-level considered judgements.) But these principles will also have a justificatory role. If our considered judgements conflict but one is in accordance with one of these higher-order principles and the other is not, then, *ceterus paribus*, we should accept the judgement that is in accordance with the higher-order principle and reject the other. Moreover, some considered judgements are more firmly held than others. Where we have half-considered judgements, judgements that we are tempted to hold on some grounds and to reject on others—judgements that is, that we are less sure of, then we have a very good reason to modify them to cohere with the rest. But if we have a higher-order moral principle that conflicts with a great mass of very deeply entrenched considered judgements, as perhaps the principle of utility does, then, again *ceterus paribus*, we have a good reason to reject the higher-order principle.

We shuttle back and forth, as Rawls puts it, until we get these various elements into equilibrium. We extend this to *wide* reflective equilibrium when we add various background theories and principles such as theories about social structure, social change, the function of morality and ideology, the economy, the person and the like. We seek in a similar way to shuttle back and forth between considered judgements, moral principles, moral theories and social theories (and perhaps other theories as well) until we get a coherent package that meets our reflective expectations and hopes. Thus we achieve for a time a stable reflective equilibrium in the unending dialectical process of weaving and unweaving the patterns of our beliefs in order to make sense of our lives, to see things as comprehensively and connectedly as we reasonably can and to guide our conduct.

We start here from traditions and return to tradition. There can be no stepping out of our societies and traditions to be purely rational agents, moral agents, or political animals *uberhaupt*. Such a notion is not merely utopian, it is incoherent. But we are not imprisoned by our traditions either. No belief is in principle immune to criticism and rejection. Whole traditions, plank by plank, can be transformed as we repair and even rebuild, in Neurath's famous metaphor, the ship at sea.

Philosophy-as-critical-theory-of-society should use, as an integral element, some such method of wide reflective equilibrium. It would enable it to develop this normative critical side without falling into an overly stringent empiricism or adopting an intuitionism that would surely not fit well with the fallibilism of critical theory or its generalized natural-

istic framework. Moreover, it is a method that does not require the taking of any epistemological or metaphysical position. We can be free of such tendentious and arcane matters.

A critical theory, which might even turn out to be a historicist theory, can avoid the relativizing claims of conceptual imprisonment, hermeneutical circles, and incommensurabilities as well as claims that fundamental concepts in its armory are essentially contested concepts.³⁹ It can do justice to the reality of contestedness, conflict and diversity in social life without imputing *essential* contestedness or incommensurabilities between which we must just choose. We can, in this way, reasonably avoid existentialist high drama or Fideist plunking. We can have an empirical-theoretical-cum-normative theory which can provide guidance in wrestling with the problems of life and which can help inform our understanding of who we are and who we might become. This is a worthy enough task for philosophy after the death of epistemology, metaphysics and the grand tradition of *a priori* assurances of metaphysical comfort.

Notes

- [1] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1979) and *Consequences of Pragmatism*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1982). Kai Nielsen, "Challenging Analytic Philosophy" in *Free Inquiry*, vol. 4, no. 4 (Fall 1984); "Rorty and the Self-Image of Philosophy" in *International Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 18 (1986), pp. 19-28; "How to be Sceptical about Philosophy" in *Philosophy*, vol. 61, no. 235 (January 1986), pp. 83-93; "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy" in *Inquiry*, vol. 29, no. 3 (September 1986), pp. 277-304; "Can There be Progress in Philosophy?" in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 18, no. 1 (January 1987), pp. 1-30.
- [2] Isaac Levi, "Escape from Boredom: Edification According to Rorty" in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XI, no. 4 (December 1981), p. 509.
- [3] Donald Davidson, *Truth and Interpretation*, (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press 1984), pp. 183-198.
- [4] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. xiii-xxvii and his essay on Davidson's account of truth in Ernest Lepore (editor), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives in the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Limited 1986).
- [5] Hilary Putnam, "After Empiricism" in John Rajchman and Cornell West (editors), *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press 1985), p. 49.

- [6] Richard Rorty, "The Unnaturalness of Epistemology" in D.F. Gustafson and B.L. Tapscott (editors), *Body, Mind and Method*, (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel 1979), pp. 77-92; Hilary Putnam, "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized" in Kenneth Baynes, *et. al.* (editors), *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1987), pp. 239-242.
- [7] Alice Ambrose Lazerowitz, "Commanding a Clear View of Philosophy" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. LXIX (1975-6), pp. 5-21.
- [8] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Philosophy and its History" in *Analyse & Kritik*, Jahrgang 4 (1982), pp. 102-113.
- [9] Rorty criticizes this account perceptively in his *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 211-230.
- [10] *Ibid.*
- [11] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 13-32.
- [12] Rorty, *op. cit.*
- [13] Putnam, "After Empiricism", p. 28.
- [14] *Ibid.*
- [15] Kai Nielsen, "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy" and "Can There be Progress in Philosophy?"
- [16] The essays by Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty and Ian Hacking in Richard Rorty *et. al.* (editors), *Philosophy in History*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 1984) importantly challenge the whole idea of there being perennial problems in philosophy.
- [17] John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, (Boston, MA: The Beacon Press 1957), *The Quest For Certainty*, (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam and Sons 1960), *Problems of Men*, (New York, NY: Philosophical Library), pp. 3-20, 169-179, 211-353, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York, NY: Dover Publications Inc. 1953), Chapters I, XII, XIII and XIV and "The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy" in *Creative Intelligence*, John Dewey *et. al.* (editors), (New York, NY: Holt, 1917), pp. 3-69.
- [18] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1985), and Kai Nielsen, "On Needing a Moral Theory: Rationality, Considered Judgments and the Grounding of Morality" in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 13 (April 1982).
- [19] Kai Nielsen, "Can There be Progress in Philosophy?"
- [20] Jurgen Habermas, *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, Band I & II (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1981); Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1981); David Ingram, *Habermas and the Dialective of Reason*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1987); and

- Syla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press 1986).
- [21] Kai Nielsen, "Emancipatory Social Science and Social Critique" in Daniel Callahan and Bruce Jennings (editors), *Ethics, the Social Sciences and Policy Analysis*, (New York, NY: Plenum Press 1983), pp. 113-157 and "Can There Be Progress in Philosophy?"; Jurgen Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter" in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, pp. 296-315.
- [22] Charles Taylor's account here is perceptive. Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, pp. 464-485. See also Charles Taylor and Alan Montefiore, "From an Analytical Perspective" in Gabris Kortian, *Meta-Critique*, (London, England: Cambridge University Press 1980), pp. 1-21.
- [23] Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity" and Jurgen Habermas, "Questions and Counter Questions" both in Richard J. Bernstein (editor), *Habermas and Modernity*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1985); Kai Nielsen, "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy" and "Can There Be Progress After Philosophy?"
- [24] Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 4-29 and "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in Meryl Patterson and Robert Vaughan (eds.), *The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Michael Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books 1984), pp. 32-50, 76-97, 333-390; David Couzens Hoy, "Introduction" and his "Power, Repression, Progress, Foucault, Lukes and the Frankfurt School"; and Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Robinow, "What is Maturity? Habermas and Foucault on 'What is Enlightenment?'" , all in Hoy (editor), *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell 1986).
- [25] Charles Taylor, "Use and Abuse of Theory" and Kai Nielsen, "A Marxist Conception of Ideology" both in A. Parel (editor), *Ideology, Philosophy and Politics*, (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 1983).
- [26] Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth" in Ernest LePore (editor), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspective in the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*.
- [27] Kai Nielsen, "Moral Theory: Rationality, Considered Judgments and the Grounding of Morality," "Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective: Wide Reflective Equilibrium and the Hermeneutical Circle" in Evan Simpson (editor), *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*, (Edmonton, AB: Academic Press 1987), and "Reflective Equilibrium and the Transformation of Philosophy," forthcoming.

- [28] Richard W. Miller, "Marx and Analytic Philosophy: The Story of a Rebirth" in *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 4 (December 1983), pp. 846-861 and his *Analyzing Marx*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1984). John Roemer (editor), *Analytical Marxism*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 1986); G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press 1978), Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 1987) and Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx*, (London: England: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1981).
- [29] This comes out clearly in his exchange with Rorty. See references in note 24.
- [30] Ian Hacking, "Styles of Scientific Reasoning" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 145-165. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* and Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1982).
- [31] See Rorty's discussion of Rawls and of wide reflective equilibrium in "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy".
- [32] It is important to contrast two very recent (1987) essays, essays which I think are much more satisfactory, with two earlier essays which I think are vulnerable in the way I have argued in "Can There be Progress in Philosophy?". The more recent essays I have in mind are "Solidarity or Objectivity?" and "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy". The earlier essays are "Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 80 (1983) and "Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism" in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (pp. 160-175).
- [33] Ian Hacking, "Styles of Scientific Reasoning" and Alasdair Mac Intyre, "Relativism, Power and Philosophy" in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, pp. 385-411.
- [34] Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" or "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy."
- [35] Levi, *op. cit.* See my development of it in "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy."
- [36] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1971), pp. 19-21, 48-51, 577-587; "The Independence of Moral Theory" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. XLVII (1974/75), pp. 7-10. Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," in *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 76 (1979); "Moral Theory and Plasticity of Persons." in *The Monist*, vol. 62 (July 1979); "Some Methods of Ethics and Linguistics" in *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 37 (1980), "Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedean Points" in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 10 (March 1980);

- “Two Approaches to Theory Acceptance in Ethics” in David Copp and David Zimmerman (editors), *Morality, Reason and Truth*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld 1985), and “An Argument About the Relativity of Justice” in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, (1987); Jane English, “Ethics and Science” in *Proceedings of the XVI Congress of Philosophy*; Kai Nielsen, “On Needing a Moral Theory: Rationality, Considered Judgments and the Grounding of Morality,” “Considered Judgments Again,” in *Human Studies*, vol. 5 (April-June, 1982), and *Equality and Liberty*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld 1985), Chapter 2.
- [37] Kai Nielsen, “Searching For an Emancipatory Perspective: Wide Reflective Equilibrium and the Hermeneutical Circle.”
- [38] W.D. Falk, *Ought, Reasons and Morality*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1986).
- [39] Kai Nielsen, “Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective: Wide Reflective Equilibrium and the Hermeneutical Circle.”