

REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PHILOSOPHY

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I

To the dismay of some, to the delight of others and to the annoyance of still others, there has been, even in the Anglo-American-Scandinavian cultural ambience, a breakup of a consensus about what philosophy is. Two recent anthologies *After Philosophy* and *Post-Analytic Philosophy* tell a good bit of the story.¹ Faced with this breakup, I am neither dismayed, delighted nor annoyed. Instead, I am rather cautiously optimistic, thinking it a hopeful sign, a chance, where our ways of doing things have become moribund, to take a radically different turning. In a series of articles I have argued that in some distinct ways philosophy, if it actually has not come to an end, should have.² But I have also argued (hoping I am not trying to have it both ways) that there can, and should, be a radical transformation of philosophy in which philosophy as a distinct kind of critical theory, integrally linked to the human sciences, can, Richard Rorty to the contrary notwithstanding, come to play an important role in our cultural life.

Dieter Misgeld, stressing particularly what I have said in this connection about moral philosophy, has subjected this view to a sympathetic critique.³ I want here, in probing that critique, to both clarify and amplify my own views. My aim here is not so much to refute Misgeld or to counter Misgeld, that very confrontational style has its rather severe limitations, and point counter point in such circumstances can quickly become a bore (particularly to the reader). My aim, rather,

¹ Kenneth Baynes et al., *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986) and John Rajchman et al. (eds.), *Post-analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

² Kai Nielsen, "Challenging Analytic Philosophy", *Free Inquiry* Vol. 4, No. 4 (Fall 1984); Kai Nielsen, "Rorty and the Self-Image of Philosophy", *International Studies in Philosophy* Vol. 18 (1986), pp. 19-28; Kai Nielsen, "How to be Sceptical about Philosophy", *Philosophy* Vol. 61, No. 235 (January 1986), pp. 83-93; Kai Nielsen, "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy", *Inquiry* Vol. 29, No. 3 (September 1986), pp. 277-304; Kai Nielsen, "Can There be Progress in Philosophy?" *Metaphilosophy* (January 1987); and Kai Nielsen, "Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective: Wide Reflective Equilibrium and the Hermeneutical Circle" in Evan Simpson (ed.), *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning* (Edmonton, Alberta: Academic Press, 1987); and Kai Nielsen, "On the Transformation of Philosophy", *Dalhousie Review* (1989).

³ Dieter Misgeld, "The Limits of a Theory of Practice: How Pragmatic can a Critical Theory of Society Be?" in *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*, pp. 165-81.

is to further develop in the light of Misgeld's criticisms my conception of wide reflective equilibrium and to exhibit its strategic role in the transformation of philosophy. I shall conclude in Section IV with a response to a very different Derridean reaction to proceeding as I have.

II

Misgeld seems at least to agree with me that a transformation of philosophy, and thus of moral philosophy, is in order, that this transformation should be in the direction of a critical theory of society and that it should (a) involve a reconciliation of the neopragmatist critique of foundationalism with critical theory and (b) that an adequate critical theory will, among other things, be a form of social critique addressing real and often large scale social problems. Moreover, it will, as well, provide guidance for philosophers as to what should be their role as reflective critics of culture and of contemporary ideologies. He differs from me about the details of how this critical work is to be done, over how the underlying conceptions are to be construed and he believes that the reconciliation between neo-pragmatism and critical theory should be a different one than the one I entertain.⁴ He also, though he only asserts this, believes my method of wide reflective equilibrium will not do the work I set for it. It is, he believes, a fifth wheel in my machinery.

I shall in response argue here that the method of wide reflective equilibrium provides the theoretical cement that is needed both in my account and, in effect, in Misgeld's alternative account of critical theory at the juncture of normative critique with both theory and practice. In this domain it helps tie critical theory to the world, to provide a coherent account of the unity of theory and practice and to afford, where normative critique is at issue, a test of a whole range of the claims of emancipatory social theory. It is precisely such a methodology that will show us that both the ordinary norms of the life-world and critical reflective norms are essential in communicative rationalization. Wide reflective equilibrium exhibits how they are related and what their respective legitimate spheres are. Without such a conception critical theory is in danger of becoming a free-floating meta-narrative – a loose cannon – which will turn into just another grand theory devoid of critical thrust or the analogue of an empirical test in the moral domain.⁵

I shall now tie this in with the specifics of Misgeld's critique. Critical theory, Misgeld tells us, is incompatible with the claim that we can know

⁴ My views here, views which Misgeld examines, come out most fully in my "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy".

⁵ Frederick Crews, "The House of Grand Theory", *The New York Review of Books*, Volume XXXIII, No. 9 (May 29, 1986), pp. 36–43.

how, through practicing the method of wide reflective equilibrium, to secure an ever widening range of consensus in moral and political judgments. But where exactly, or even inexactly, are the elements of incompatibility? Why should critical theory reject wide reflective equilibrium? My argument is that it should not.

Misgeld tells us that wide reflective equilibrium does not do justice to the embeddedness of our present judgments about society in our life-world. But that is false, for wide reflective equilibrium with its coherence pattern of justification requires that we start and return, again and again, to our actual considered judgments: to the practical, firmly embedded specific norms of our life-world. And where there is – as there frequently is – in our social life the rhetorical manipulation of ethical questions there is the self-correcting requirement, given wide reflective equilibrium, of squaring these moral convictions with more general moral principles, with a careful comparison of closely scrutinized moral theories, with our best factual knowledge, with the best validated background psychological and social theories available to us and with similarly warranted theories of nature. If there is some reason to expect manipulation, initial moral convictions must run at least some of that gauntlet to be rightly regarded as legitimate. Where some of the moral convictions we start with are subject to rhetorical manipulation, a determined application of that procedure will correct for that. We repair and sometimes even extensively rebuild the ship at sea.

Surely (*pace* Misgeld) wide reflective equilibrium gives us very good ways of detecting the rhetorical manipulation of ethical questions or the suppressing of ethical questions and it affords us a procedure to use for criticizing those very practices. This makes it an ally of critical theory and not something that is incompatible with it. No grounds at all have been provided for saying that wide reflective equilibrium should not become a key methodological tool of critical theory.

I did (*pace* Richard Rorty), particularly in my “Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy”, stress a pragmatism with method and I did, in the broad way that the pragmatists construed scientific method, stress its importance for critical theory. I, no more than Habermas, want critical theory to be just another meta-narrative, another “grand theory” without empirical constraints.⁶ I do indeed want a holistic theory but not an undisciplined uncontrolled speculative theory above anything so vulgar as empirical tests. (To say this, of course, is not to say anything about *decisive* disconfirmation.) But, if that is our aim, that requires that the use of scientific method be a part of critical theory. But to have, if you will, these “positivist” concerns is no reason at all to construe scientific method so narrowly that scientific knowledge is all taken

⁶ I make this particularly evident in my “Can There be Progress in Philosophy?” and in my “Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective”.

to be a form of technological knowledge ruling out of its domain communicative and reflective knowledge. The pragmatists never construed scientific method and scientific knowledge so narrowly and in such a scientific way and there is no reason why they should identify reason with instrumental reason and be incapable of making a critique of instrumental rationality. With their stress on the continuum of means and ends, they had a very different picture of rationality than that of Hobbes or Hume or in our time of Bertrand Russell or David Gauthier. Some contemporary pragmatists, e.g. Sidney Hook and Ernest Nagel, are political conservatives but that is not at all related to their pragmatist methodology but is rooted in their historical experiences (the purge trials, World War II, the Cold War and the like). There is nothing in pragmatism, as Habermas recognizes, though not Horkheimer and Adorno, which justifies tying it, as the latter two did, to American business values or to a conception of knowledge that is incapable of resisting the functional subordination of knowledge to the demands of new forms (scientifically rationalized) of political power and social regulation. Scientific knowledge and communicative and reflective knowledge should not be taken as mutually exclusive and there is no good reason for a critical theory to do so.

Critical theory, as I construe it, and as does Misgeld as well, is a large scale narrative of modernity. (I am not saying that is all it is.) However, in the transformation of philosophy I envisage and I think Misgeld, following Habermas envisages, this narrative will not be a meta-narrative. It will not be just another speculative philosophy of history without empirical constraints. It will be "a grand theory" but still an empirical theory. If it is not falsifiable, it is at least infirmable on empirical grounds. It is not, that is, a theory which holds no matter how the world turns. It is not a theory that will always be accepted no matter what its evidential support.

It is important to get a systematic social theory which has as a part of its central core a set of warrantably assertable truth-claims. (If Misgeld's characterization is correct Habermas has produced just such a theory.) Critical theory so construed is a theory which is distinct from political philosophies as we have come to know them and from moral theories such as we find them in the tradition of moral philosophy. It is a theory with an emancipatory thrust and with that emancipatory thrust there is a normative critique and a set of moral and other evaluative comments on social institutions. Assessments are made of social institutions: both actual institutions and those which are viewed as possible (historically feasible). It tries to give an adequate account of what society is actually like and of what a good society, what truly human society, given historically feasible possibilities, would look like. But still, in such a critical theory of society, prominence is given to sociology over ethical theory and political philosophy. That is to say, even in normative

critique, prominence is given to the empirical-cum-theoretical over any attempt to moralize the world, including moralizing the world through abstract moral argument.

We need a theory – and this is what Misgeld takes Habermas’s critical theory to be doing – which, in trying to carry out the Enlightenment project of modernity, advocates a certain attitude toward the future of modernity. We should, by being willing to think hypothetically, indeed counterfactually, direct our thinking to a certain range of social choices, choices which are possible choices given our past history. We need a comprehensive social theory perspicuously to articulate this range and to determine, if it can be done, what, in view of this range, would be, morally speaking, the more desirable set of social choices within this range.

In my schematization of a critical theory I have a niche for moral theory and practical reasoning though hardly an independent niche. And in doing this I have also shown how we can get a grip on our practical moral problems – problems over which in social life there are often enough sharp conflicts giving rise to all manner of ideological responses. Misgeld, however, is mistaken in thinking I am arguing that, ignoring politics, we can work out these problems in good Popperian fashion by analyzing our moral beliefs one by one. There is nothing in my account which gives to understand that. Indeed, in “Can There be Progress in Philosophy?” there is an explicit disavowal of that. Rather we must see ethics and politics as inextricably intertwined; we must come to see that serious social moral problems pervasively tend to also be political problems and we must come to seek the resolution of our historically determinate moral problems against the background of theories of social change and of possible epochal social development. Certain kinds of work relations, to take an example, seem very wrong indeed but the moral criticisms we would make of them cannot reasonably be independent of what work relations are possible in an industrial world and what they are and can be in turn cannot be answered independently of whether socialism and, if so, what kind of socialism, is on our historical agenda. What we need to do is to display the possibilities – genuine causal possibilities – here and to try to make some reasonable judgment about which of the various possibilities are the most desirable.

It is in the doing of the latter that the method of wide reflective equilibrium is particularly important. Suppose that one of the possibilities is so to organize work that we have small worker controlled and owned firms often competing with each other and another is to have large state owned and hierarchically controlled factories run by the state (i.e., by a bureaucracy of state managers) but where the wages are high, the workplace clean and safe, the hours reasonable and there is little in the way of responsibility required of the workers coupled with their

having considerable security. Which, where these are our only feasible alternatives, is the more desirable future to try to make our own? In trying to come to a conclusion here we would try to trace out the probable life consequences of the various choices. We would need to make specific moral judgments about various work situations here and relate them to the more general values of our society such as the comparative value we would attach in conditions of moderate scarcity to security, autonomy, happiness, creativity and the like and, taking all these elements together, and others as well, we would try to get the most coherent package of considered judgments and policy recommendations that we would on reflection be prepared to accept. But this is just to use the method of wide reflective equilibrium, though, following Habermas, we would seek, as an ideal, though often, perhaps always, only as a heuristic, to carry out these deliberations under conditions of undistorted discourse where the ideals of discursive freedom and argumentational fairness obtain. To the extent that our deliberations about what is right or wrong, just or unjust, in seeking to attain a reflective equilibrium, are carried out under conditions approximating those of undistorted discourse, we can be more confident of their adequacy.

We have here with the use of wide reflective equilibrium a coherentist model of justification. A further desiderata is to get a consensus about when we are in such a state. The hope is, against post-modernist skepticism, to gain not only a consensus but a *rational* consensus. If we can approximate Habermasian conditions of undistorted discourse and, if, as well, we have a consensus in moral belief rooted in a mutually recognized and accepted wide reflective equilibrium, then we have a rational consensus. I say that under such a circumstance, we would have a rational consensus because our beliefs under such circumstances would not be ideologically distorted and would, as well, cohere together in the widest possible equilibrium: an equilibrium where our specific reflective considered judgments matched with our moral principles, principles that in turn best matched with, and were, as well, rationalized by, a moral theory that resulted from a comparison of the range of moral theories historically available or constructable by careful thought where each theory, to facilitate the comparison, was in turn cast in the same role. It would also be the case, where we carried out this method, that both the considered judgments and the theories, where we had for a time attained reflective equilibrium, would match with what we know about the world, the best available human sciences and social theories, the best account we have of the role of morality in society and our best natural science knowledge, including the cosmological claims that in that circumstance could most reasonably be made. (The latter are important where religious issues are likely to enter into our moral deliberations.)

The overarching aim is to get the best fit possible of all these diverse elements, elements which are themselves the best warranted elements in their respective domains. With such elements, taken together, we seek to forge a coherent package. When we have such coherence we have for a time attained wide reflective equilibrium, though, as our knowledge and understanding increases, we will get other and more adequate wide reflective equilibria. No critical theory can in its substantive claims be a once and for all thing, eternally fixed like a Cartesian philosophy, though we can hope for a development here analogous to the development of natural science. If a consensus rooted in such a wide reflective equilibrium is not a rational consensus what then would a rational consensus look like? It seems to me, though I am unsure how to further argue for it, that such a consensus is just what we would take a rational consensus in such domains to be. (This indeed may be an implicit but non-stipulative definition of what counts as “a rational consensus” in such contexts.)

III

Misgeld doubts that such a theory could have an emancipatory thrust. I certainly do not mean to suggest that it could replace class struggle or revolutionary action, though in certain circumstances (say if Sweden were the world) it *might* be able to replace the latter and, in any circumstance, it could give us a clearer sense of what the revolutionary activity is to achieve.

In maintaining that my schemata for a critical theory misses the pragmatist and neo-pragmatist (e.g. Rorty) stress on solving the particular normative problems of human beings, Misgeld overlooks the role of particular considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium. In attaining such a wide equilibrium, we must include (vitaly include) particular considered judgments given by our sense of justice and right operating in determinate contexts where particular moral problems arise. These judgements are in turn rationalized in the way the method of wide reflective equilibrium specifies. This rationalization involves a shuttling back and forth between theories, principles and concrete moral judgments with a mutual correction between them until we have, considering them together, the best fit. This is a method for coming to grips with determinate problems of human beings which could be utilized in social disputes and by people doing applied ethics and it answers to the interests of the pragmatists in a more determinate way than they were able to specify themselves. Moreover (*pace* Misgeld) wide reflective equilibrium provides a way of coherently appealing both to the general and the theoretical and, as well, to the particular and “the practical” in the attempt to provide a theory of social reconstruction. Indeed, the way I have schematized the very idea of a critical theory, it

builds a pragmatic awareness of the limits of theory into the very design of the theory. And this in turn fits nicely with Habermas's argument in *The Theory of Communicative Action* that the social scientist does not have a privileged position in social assessment, for he, like everyone else, must rely on a potential for critical reasoning which participants in the society with their different forms of discourse (theoretical, practical and aesthetic) already possess, though typically not in a highly articulate form. As Misgeld puts it himself, Habermas's "communicative model of social action attributes to people acting and speaking in the society 'just as rich an interpretive competence as the observer himself' ".⁷ With this non-privileging of the observer's perspective, there is no suppression, as there is in scientific modes of thought, of common sense conceptions of what is good and bad, right and wrong or fair and unfair, though this is not to suggest that these commonsense conceptions cannot be criticized or should not be criticized or that we cannot come to have more adequate moral beliefs. This also gives us a basis, and wide reflective equilibrium provides a rationale for it, of non-eclectically integrating ethnomethodological, phenomenological and hermeneutical conceptions of social action into a critical theory of society.

Misgeld sides with a Rortyan neo-pragmatism – a kind of aesthetic pragmatism without method – in rejecting the idea that a critical theory of society can, as I maintain, provide a method which will be an important aid for solving the problems specific to modern societies and history.⁸ For him it could only be a background view, a theoretical narrative, perspicuously displaying how various key social problems are related and how they belong to the history of modernity. It cannot give us a rigorous explanation of the emergence of these problems or a rigorous normative resolution of them. All it can do with its narrative structure is to depict – hopefully perspicuously display in a loose association – clusters of difficulties and survival problems that afflict modern societies and indicate various sociologically feasible resolutions. Reflecting on these problems taken together and interlocked, it can help us to reflect on how our history is to be understood. It can, Misgeld tells us, only be taken as a narrative which can lead us to look beyond piecemeal and ad-hoc solutions to discrete problems by deepening our sense of how all these problems are linked in the history of societies. (One of the weaknesses of most "applied philosophy" or "applied

⁷ Dieter Misgeld, "Modernity and Social Science", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (1987), p. 11. See also his review essay on Habermas's *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, *Canadian Journal of Sociology* Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 1983), pp. 433–452.

⁸ Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism Without Method" in Paul Kurtz (ed.), *Sidney Hook: Philosopher of Democracy and Humanism* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1983), pp. 259–73. My response to this is in "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy".

ethics" is that it, without any sense of narrative, is limited to a piecemeal approach.)

I agree that critical theory should do all those things and I further agree that the picture of modernity in all its facets given by Habermas and Wellmer is of a very considerable value indeed and in the ways Misgeld indicates.⁹ But what I do not see is why critical theory must limit itself to such narrative articulation. Why cannot it, as well, engage in causal explanation, as we find Weber and Marx sometimes doing, and in moral critique as we find Dewey, Rawls, Mill and Marx sometimes doing? These elements along with the setting out of narratives should be seen in a critical theory of society as complimentary and not as rivals. A comprehensive critical theory, as I schematized it, will contain all three elements hopefully melded into an integrated whole. Moreover, to the extent that it is successful in utilizing and integrating these elements the charge that critical theory is just another grandiose meta-narrative will be deflected.

Surely, standing where we are now, we would want a comprehensive critical theory to be critically relevant to the fundamental social questions of the day, but that does not at all mean that we could just churn out the specific answers from the theory. That is no more reasonable or necessary on the theories' own account than that we be able to simply churn out answers to engineering problems or applied physics problems from theoretical physics. But in a way analogous to the way theoretical physics is keenly relevant to these practical domains so the hope is that a comprehensive critical theory of society would be relevant to the live social problems that bedevil us. It would be a very impoverished critical theory indeed which could not (again *pace* Misgeld) take a position on the advisability in certain types of circumstance, e.g. in South Africa at present, of a purely reformist road as over against taking a road that had revolution as its end or vice-versa.¹⁰ Misgeld would so hobble or limit (to use a more neutral word) critical theory that such choices would not be in its purview, but he has given us no good reasons for sticking with such a defeatist limitation anymore than he has for saying that critical theory can only articulate a narrative and cannot engage in causal explanation or normative critique. Again a critical theory which uses wide reflective equilibrium will have what in moral domains is the equivalent of practical social experimentation, keeping close, as Misgeld would have it, to daily detail. It will not be removed from daily life in the way Misgeld alleges critical theory to be. Misgeld neglects the possibilities for a coherent

⁹ Albrecht Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*" in Richard Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 35-66.

¹⁰ I have attempted to do just that in my "South Africa: The Choice Between Reform and Revolution", *Philosophical Forum* (1987).

unity of theory and practice (something Habermas has repeatedly sought) in a properly articulated critical theory. Indeed, I would be very skeptical that critical theory could actually be *critical* if it had not attained something approximating that unity.¹¹

IV

I want to turn now in closing to a rather different type of reaction to such a use of wide reflective equilibrium as a methodological core of a comprehensive critical theory. There are the Derridian conceptions of dissemination and deconstruction directed against theory construction and hermeneutics. I seek in a good Quinean way to set out beliefs, including our moral beliefs, into a coherent web of belief. Deconstruction and dissemination seek to disrupt, to break our confidence and complacency by getting us to see, as David Hoy well puts it, our traditions, our forms of life, our webs of belief, “not as a harmonious, progressive whole, a cozy web of beliefs, but as a tissue of fabrications, a patchwork of remnants”.¹² Indeed, Gadamer, Winch and Heidegger are right in believing that we have come to be who and what we are through our own historical tradition – how else could we be socialized? – but that does not justify our accepting its *authority*. Hermeneutists such as Gadamer are mistaken (logocentric is Derrida’s phrase) in assuming “that texts or the ‘call of Being’ have an authoritative say to which we must listen respectfully”.¹³

I think we should respond with both a Yes and No here. We have to say “No” in the sense that unless we have an initiation into a culture or tradition we will have, except perhaps in some very, very rudimentary sense, no understanding at all. For establishing for a culture what is intelligible and for the norms with which we must start, there can be no avoiding such an initiation, such a participant’s understanding.¹⁴ Traditional norms are inescapable and they cannot but have an *initial* authority. It is also reasonable to see if we can put our various moral

¹¹ On arguments about how critical the extant Habermasian critical theory actually is, see Nancy Fraser, “What’s Critical About Critical Theory?” *New German Critique*, no. 35 (Spring/Summer 1985), pp. 87–131 and Joe McCarney, “How Critical is Critical Theory?” *Radical Philosophy* (1986).

¹² David Hoy, “Jacques Derrida” in Quentin Skinner (ed.), *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 61. See also David Hoy, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982).

¹³ Hoy, “Jacques Derrida”, p. 61.

¹⁴ Kai Nielsen, “Sociological Knowledge: Winch, Marxism and *Verstehen* Revisted”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. XLII, No. 4 (June 1982), pp. 465–491. See also my “Rationality and Relativism”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 1974), pp. 313–332 and my “Rationality and Universality”, *The Monist* Vol. 59, No. 3 (July 1976), pp. 441–455.

beliefs (some given in tradition), or at least a considerable cluster of them, widely felt to be particularly important, into a coherent package. There is at least no *a priori* reason why we should fail or that, even if we are careful, we must fail. That is the “No” to the deconstructionist claim.

However, there is also a “yes” to be said here as well. Among our moral beliefs there is surely likely to be some that are little better than superstitions. There are others that become effectively “ours” through domination, manipulation or from the having of cosmological conceptions which are not only outmoded but without rational warrant. In certain contexts, and indeed particularly in our contexts with our class divisions, with the depth and pervasiveness of ideological indoctrination and mystification through the culture industry, it is important to come to recognize that some of our moral beliefs (perhaps more than we ever expected) are fabrications, a patchwork of remnants. We should be very wary indeed of getting these beliefs into some reflective equilibrium and we should also beware, in seeking equilibria, of too quick a closure here. Faced with the initial situation in which we are enculturated into a tradition, we then, even as our web of belief is stamped in and developed, come to have, perhaps due to our big brains, something of the capacity to question or at least in various ways to react against our enculturation.¹⁵ Still, we need to have first been enculturated into some tradition to even be able to so react. For the human animal, tradition is the first word. That notwithstanding, dissemination (the Derridian notion) is surely important here; sometimes we do not want – or at least should not want – a cozy web of belief; we need, instead, to shake up our beliefs or even to through and through undermine certain of them and sometimes the ones to be undermined are anything but peripheral beliefs for us. But this cannot literally be all our beliefs *holus bolus*. For, if we rejected them all, we could not even iconoclastically react to our fabrications, to our remnants, to recognize them as fabrications or remnants that we might react against or reject as inappropriate to our lives. At any given time, some norms from our traditional cluster must stand fast at least initially. If that were not so, we would not even be able to be iconoclasts or to transvaluate values.

However, we might be utterly baffled in a particular circumstance as to which moral beliefs are in for undermining, which are to be stood by, which modified and the like. We might not even begin to know enough in a particular situation to know how to get our beliefs into something even approximating reflective equilibrium. All we might have is a rather inchoate feeling that something is rotten in Denmark.

I think we should be both wary of that feeling and respect it. It could

¹⁵ This is something that both Charles Saunders Peirce and John Dewey fixed into our philosophical consciousness.

be an irrational reaction but it also might be an inarticulate moral sensitivity that we should respect. It is rationalism gone wild to think we should just generally set aside such gut feelings. They may answer to something very important in us for which later we may come to find a more rationalized voice. To reject those feelings, to always, or even usually, set them aside or bracket them, particularly when they are dwelt on or persist in a cool hour, is a very questionable philosophical conservatism with possible consequences in the political domain which are also conservative. It is possibly a very irrational fear of what *may* be the irrational. Such caution, such distrust of the sentiments, is, or so it seems to me, *not* an attitude which furthers human emancipation. We should not so monolithically and routinely set aside as irrational what we through and through feel morally even when we cannot, at some given time, or perhaps ever, adequately rationalize it. Sometimes in the roughness of our social world we can do little more than resist, sticking with our inchoate moral sense, the forces that oppress us and dominate us. Foucault has been of immeasurable help here. Sometimes, that is, we can only fight back with whatever resources we have against the forces that oppress us and sometimes the task is, where our alienation is very deep, to come to see *that* we are oppressed and something of how we are oppressed.

The task of the unmasker, say a Foucault or a Chomsky, is sometimes just to do this and to show the moral agent (Moore's plain man) that in so resisting there is nothing unreasonable in her behaviour. And, of course, the moral philosopher or social theorist, in one of her roles, is also a moral agent (After all she or he is not a blithe spirit.) Yet without reneging on her determination to resist and to trust her inchoate moral feelings, the moral agent, who is also a moral theorist and a moral critic, should do her utmost to find a rationale for those feelings – a rationale that would withstand reflective scrutiny – and, failing that, to try to see if there is not, after all, a “dark side” to those feelings which, if brought to light, would make them (or some of them) problematical, perhaps even so problematical that some would be a good candidates for extinction. In such scrutinizing wide reflective equilibrium is an indispensable way of going about things.

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