THE NEW CONSTELLATION

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The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity

Richard J. Bernstein

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For Paul and Rosemary

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Introduction

Soon after the publication *of Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1983), a sympathetic critic wrote to me about the book. His comments were perceptive and incisive. But he concluded by abruptly asking: "When are you going to 'take on' Heidegger and the Trench? When are you going to confront the 'postmodern' challenges – and deconstruction – of the philosophic orientation that you develop in the book?" At first I was somewhat bemused by these questions. They were similar to questions I had been asked before. When I had published *Praxis and Action* (1971) and *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (1976), there was always someone who asked why I had not also treated some theme, some problem or thinker that the reader took to be "really" central to my inquiry.

But my critic's questions had a more pointed significance. In *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* I claimed that

> a new conversation is now emerging among philosophers – a conversation about human rationality – and as a result of this dialogue we are beginning to gain a new understanding of rationality that has important ramifications for both theoretical and practical life.[1]

I also declared that

> the contours of the conversation about human rationality, especially as it pertains to science, hermeneutics and *praxis*, have recently taken on a new and exciting shape. I want not only to reveal the common themes of this dialogue – the shared assumptions, commitments, and insights – but also to do justice to the different individual voices and emphases within it.[2]

The questions directed to me were a challenge to defend these "shared assumptions, commitments, and insights." According to *one* reading of what has been called "the postmodern moment," a rupture has occurred, a radical break that calls into question all philosophic projects. In an article written as a preparatory study for *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, I had even risked naming my critical philosophic orientation "non-foundational pragmatic humanism."[3] This label was deliberately provocative, especially the use of the signifier "humanism." I wrote that

> "humanism" … has become something of a dirty word in recent times. It has been used by critics to identify everything that they think is wrong in the modern world … In the new postmodern, poststructuralist Manichean theology, "humanism" seems to function as a name for the kingdom of Darkness …. But it is more than a matter of perversity to hold on to this sign and *not* to abandon it in the face of such varied criticisms.[4]

I was, of course, fully aware of the objections that Heideggerians and "postmodern" writers might raise. For had not Heidegger in his famous "Letter on Humanism" definitively shown us that humanism is nothing but a consequence of the metaphysical tradition that has its "origins" in Plato and reaches its culmination in Nietzsche, "the last metaphysician"? This metaphysical tradition is now "over" and needs to be overcome (*überwinden*). Had not Heidegger shown us that the *essence* of humanism – in all its guises – is *nihilism*, the nihilism that is becoming our destiny in the modern age of technology? Had not Heidegger shown the ontological need to rupture humanism in order to bring us into the clearing for "original thinking" -the thinking (of) Being?[5] Not only Heidegger but virtually every poststructuralist writer has railed against humanism – even though there are the most diverse understandings about what constitutes humanism and what is being damned. Consider, for example, the rhetorical flourish with which Foucault ends *The Order of Things:*

> Rather than the death of God – or rather in the wake of that death and in profound correlation with it – what Nietzsche's thought heralds is the end of his murderer; it is the explosion of man's face in laughter …. As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.[6]

Or again, in "The Ends of Man," where Derrida seeks to root out the vestiges of humanism in French thought, he declares (speaking of Zarathustra's laughter) that

> His laughter then will burst out, directed toward a return which no longer will have the form of the metaphysical repetition of humanism, nor, doubtless, "beyond" metaphysics, the form of a memorial or a guarding of the meaning of Being, the form of the house and of the truth of Being. He will dance, outside the house, the *aktive Vergesslichkeit*, the "active forgetting" and the cruel (*grausam*) feast of which the *Genealogy of Morals* speaks.[7]

In short, one might say that once "we" fully experience the rupture that has occurred with the "postmodern" moment, once "we" grasp the full force and sting of the critiques of humanism that trace their lineage to Nietzsche,

then even the "non-foundational pragmatic humanism" which I had been developing must be discarded – thrown into the abyss of failed metaphysical and philosophical projects. Needless to say I do *not* accept this judgment nor am I impressed by what has now become a cliché among many "postmodern" writers, i.e., that humanism is passé, to be dismissed by laughter. But I *do* recognize that these critiques and deconstructions call for a strong response.

There were other reasons why the more I thought about the questions posed to me, the more I realized they demanded a response. For even though in several of my books I have critically examined a wide variety of problems, themes, and thinkers that span much of twentieth-century Anglo-American and Continental philosophy, I had not focused on Heidegger or the heterogeneous writings of those who are frequently labeled "postmodern." Nor had I squarely confronted those Nietzschean motifs that have so deeply affected these texts. Consequently, despite my claims about a "new conversation concerning human rationality," I could justifiably be accused of ignoring and excluding some of the most important "voices" in this conversation – or more accurately those "voices" that questioned and challenged this conversation and the "shared assumptions" I sought to articulate. Furthermore I could justifiably be accused of violating a fundamental principle that I have always advocated and have sought to put into practice. This is a principle that I originally learned from my reading of the Platonic Dialogues and which was reinforced by my study of Hegel and the American pragmatic thinkers. It is the principle that has most recently been eloquently and subtly expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer.[8] The basic condition for all understanding requires one to test and risk one's convictions and prejudgments in and through an encounter with what is radically "other" and alien. To do this requires imagination and hermeneutical sensitivity in order to understand the "other" in its strongest possible light. Only by seeking to learn from the "other," only by fully grasping its claims upon one can it be critically encountered. Critical engaged dialogue requires opening of oneself to the full power of what the "other" is saying. Such an opening does not entail agreement but rather the to-and-fro play of dialogue. Otherwise dialogue degenerates into a self-deceptive monologue where one never risks testing one's prejudgments. So

the quip about Heidegger, the "French," and "postmodern" challenges was a demand to put into practice what I had been professing – to test and risk my own philosophic convictions by exposing them to the sharpest and most penetrating questioning.

There was still another consideration that was motivating the need to face these challenges. The most persistent and pervasive concern in all my writings is the question(s) of *praxis*. This concern has been in the foreground and background of all my thinking. In *Praxis and Action*, I already affirmed that "the guiding principle of this study is that the investigation of the nature, status, and significance of *praxis* and action has become the dominant concern of the most influential philosophic movements that have emerged since Hegel."[9] But again it might be objected that this is simply not true for Heidegger, the most original and influential Continental philosopher of the twentieth century, the figure who stands behind and who casts his shadow over "postmodern" writers. *Praxis* is associated with the metaphysical humanism that Heidegger so devastatingly attacks. The entire thrust of Heidegger's thinking is to displace the question of *praxis* with a far more "fundamental" question – the question of Being (*Seinsfrage*). Furthermore in much of the French poststructuralist writings there is scarcely even the mention of *"praxis"* -except as an object of suspicion. So what then is the basis for the claim that *praxis* and action have become "the dominant concern of the most influential philosophic movements that have emerged since Hegel"?

Furthermore I felt the need to take account of a phenomenon that could not be denied. In the post-Second World War period through the 1960s, the evocation of *praxis* had powerful and rich resonances for many left intellectuals throughout the world. It called to mind the early Marx, the tradition of Western Marxism and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. Throughout Eastern Europe *"praxis"* became the banner for those left intellectuals who were battling Stalinism, dogmatism, and totalitarianism. Yet by the end of the 1960s there were already many signs of the fading of Western Marxism. There was a turning away from the talk about *praxis* (and such related concepts as alienation). A new generation of thinkers no longer drew their radical inspiration from such "heroes" as Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Marcuse, Gramsci, Lukács and Korsch.

New “names” began to displace these older heroes – Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lacan. There was even the emergence of strange hybrids – “left Heideggerians,” “left Nietzscheans.” For French intellectuals, the striking and ambiguous events of May 1968, and the revelations about Stalin’s Gulag signaled a break with all forms of Marxism. Initially I found this rapid displacement of the “heroes” of Western Marxism extremely perplexing. With the possible exception of Foucault, the writings of the so-called “postmodern” intellectuals rarely dealt with ethical-political issues, or so it seemed. What was it about these “new” currents that spoke to so many younger intellectuals? How was one to account for the growing influence of “French” poststructuralism? What was it about the new interest in otherness, *différance*, the decentering of the subject, in fragments and fissures, in power/knowledge regimes that appeared to be so relevant for coming to grips with modernity and its discontents? What distinguished the “radical” gestures of “postmodernism” from older varieties of reactionary anti-modernism?

In order to answer these questions, I decided to reread and rethink what was happening in these “postmodern” interventions. To use a Hegelian turn of phrase, I wanted to discover the “truth” implicit in these heterogeneous writings. For I had become increasingly dissatisfied with the typical responses to recent developments in Continental philosophy – especially by Anglo-American philosophers. Roughly speaking, these fall into three categories: (1) total ignorance and uninformed silence; (2) polemical attacks; (3) endless internal commentary and textual analysis. Many – indeed most – Anglo-American analytic philosophers totally ignore twentieth-century Continental philosophy. For them it simply does not count as “serious” philosophy and is not worthy of consideration. It is a quagmire of confusion, obfuscation, and pretentious gesturing – flouting even the most minimal standards of clarity and rational argumentation. The occasional references to Continental philosophy are usually only polemical and disparaging – in order to “expose” its confusion and triviality. But I find no more satisfactory the defensive attitude of those who have become so enamored with Continental philosophy that they never achieve any critical distance. They become “groupies” who seize upon the latest fashionable trends. Frequently they treat these texts as if they were sacred

texts calling forth endless commentary. Some of these "commentaries" even read like parodies. With the exception of Richard Rorty (whose controversial writings are discussed in the following essays) there is scarcely another significant Anglo-American *philosopher* who has creatively appropriated "postmodern" themes. There is a paucity of judicious critiques of this work – the type of critique where one seeks to do justice to what is being said *and* also "steps back" in order to evaluate critically strengths and weaknesses, insights and blindnesses, "truth" and "falsity." In the highly charged polemical debates there are even those who ridicule the very idea of "judicious critique." They think this is only a devious power play in order to "domesticate" and contain the radical "other." But to abandon independent critique is to abandon independent thinking. Of course, there is always the risk that any critique will distort or fail to do justice to what is being criticized. But if this happens, it can only be corrected by further critique.

At an early stage of my rereading of Heidegger, the "French," and deconstructive writings, I kept noticing something which had not been adequately thematized. For despite the apparent neglect and displacement of ethical-political questions, there is a strong undercurrent in these writings that gravitated toward ethical-political issues. Gradually I began to focus on the question of critique itself – the sense in which these writings were critical and the self-understanding of critique. The question I wanted to probe is "critique in the name of what?" For in Wittgenstein's sense, the very "grammar" of critique requires some standard, some measure, some basis for critique. Otherwise there is – as Habermas claims – the danger of the critical impulse consuming itself. To put the issue in a slightly different way, I fully agree with Derrida when he says "I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately motivated by some sort of affirmation, acknowledged or not."[10] But then one must ask what precisely is being affirmed and *why?* What is it that deconstruction affirms? What is Heidegger affirming when he thinks *against* humanism? What does Foucault affirm in his archaeological and genealogical critiques? The reason why these are such perplexing and crucial questions is because of an *aporia* that seems to lie at the heart of these critiques. On the one hand, the primary rhetorical gesture of the "postmodern" moment is to be critical – of

Western rationality, logocentrism, humanism, the Enlightenment legacy, the centered subject, etc. But on the other hand, there is also a questioning, undermining and deconstruction of any and all fixed standards of critique, a relentless questioning of any appeal to *archai* or foundations. Does this mean that "postmodern" writers are ensnared in what Habermas and Apel call "performative contradictions" where critique is at once affirmed and undermined?[11] Or is there a way of reading these texts so that we can interpret them as developing new genres of critique without requiring affirming norms of critique?

With respect to basic ethical-political norms of critique, much of twentieth-century thinking has fluctuated between two extremes. There are those like Max Weber who tell us that we must frankly acknowledge that there is not – and cannot be – any *rational grounding* of the basic ethical-political norms. With cold lucidity we are compelled to commit ourselves to warring gods and demons. This is a matter of decision and commitment without the comfort of rational grounding. Consequently, there is no rational basis for our ultimate affirmations. Despite the consequential differences among Weber, decisionists and emotivists, there is a common agreement that the attempt to ground norms is a futile project. We will see that this is also true for the ironic stance taken by Richard Rorty.

At the other extreme are those who claim that the project of rationally grounding norms is not only a viable one but can be carried out. Furthermore this can be done in a way that avoids the treacherous pitfalls of "bad" foundationalism. Advocates of such a "position" like Apel and Habermas typically employ strong or weak transcendental or quasi-transcendental arguments. For they argue that speech and communication, when properly understood and analyzed, show that there are *necessary* and *unavoidable* rational norms of both theoretical and practical discourse.

We seem then to be drawn into a grand Either/Or: *either* there is a rational grounding of the norms of critique *or* the conviction that there is such a rational grounding is itself a self-deceptive illusion. But again both of these extreme alternatives have themselves been subject to sharp criticism. So the question arises, can we avoid these extremes? Is there some third way of understanding critique that avoids – passes between – the Scylla of "groundless critique" and the Charybdis of rationally grounded

critique that "rests" upon illusory foundations? There are many who think that the achievement of the "postmodern" moment is to open up the space for new styles and genres of critique that avoid the extremes and twin dangers of this grand Either/Or. But is this so? Is there a new way of understanding and practicing critique that escapes this grand Either/Or? In several of the following essays I probe this question from a variety of perspectives. This is – if not *the* central question – then at least *a* central question that is at the very heart of "modern/postmodern" debates.

In light of the above reflections I can now explain why I have entitled this volume, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity.* "Constellation" is a metaphor that I have taken from the writings of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Martin Jay gives a succinct characterization of what they mean when he writes that a constellation is a "juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle."[12] The reason why I find this metaphor so fertile is because I want to show that our "modern/postmodern" situation or predicament is one that defies and resists any and all attempts of reduction to "a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle." "Constellation" is deliberately intended to displace Hegel's master metaphor of *Aufhebung.* For, as I will argue, although we cannot (and should not) give up the *promise* and demand for reconciliation – a reconciliation achieved by what Hegel calls "determinate negation," I do not think we can any longer responsibly claim that there is or can be a final reconciliation – an *Aufhebung* in which all difference, otherness, opposition and contradiction are reconciled. There are always unexpected contingent ruptures that dis-rupt the project of reconciliation. The changing elements of the new constellation resist such reduction. What is "new" about this constellation is the growing awareness of the depth of radical instabilities. We have to learn to think and act in the "in-between" interstices of forced reconciliations and radical dispersion.

Jay also calls attention to another metaphor that is central for Adorno and which I have also appropriated: force-field (*Kraftfeld*). A force-field is a "relational interplay of attractions and aversions that constitute the dynamic transmutational structure of a complex phenomenon."[13] This is

also an extremely fertile metaphor for "comprehending" the "modern/postmodern" situation. For I want to show that this situation can be characterized as a dynamic "relational interplay of attractions and aversions." The task of comprehension today requires doing justice to the delicate unstable balance of these attractions and aversions.

Throughout I use the hyphenated expression "ethical-political." I do so in order to invoke and recall the classical (Greek) understanding of the symbiotic relation between ethics and politics. Ethics is concerned with *ēthos*, with those habits, customs and modes of response that shape and define our *praxis.* Politics is concerned with our public lives in the *polis* – with the communal bonds that at once unite and separate us as citizens. The essential link between *ēthos* and *polis* is *nomos.* Although we can distinguish ethics and politics, they are inseparable. For we cannot understand ethics without thinking through our political commitments and responsibilities. And there is no understanding of politics that does not bring us back to ethics. Ethics and politics as disciplines concerned with *praxis* are aspects of a unified practical philosophy. It is because *ethics* and *politics* are so intimately related that both Plato and Aristotle are so concerned with the tensions between them, and with the central question of what is the relation between leading a good life and becoming a good citizen. The scope of what the Greeks took to be the proper ethical-political domain is far broader and richer than modern understandings of morality. Recently, thinkers as different as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum and HansGeorg Gadamer (and many others) have developed a multifaceted critique of the narrowing of morality as it has been treated by modern philosophy. Despite their differences they all appeal to the classical Greek understanding of the domain of the ethical-political in order to criticize modern morality and moral philosophy.

My use of ethical-political is also intended to remind us of the Hegelian concept of *Sittlichkeit.* Hegel is the "modern" philosopher par excellence who at once appreciated the achievement and limitations of modern (Kantian) *Moralität.* He sought to integrate and reconcile the "truth" of modern *Moralität* (which emphasizes individual autonomy) and *Sittlichkeit* with its stress on communal "ethical substance." He argued that a new *mediated Sittlichkeit* is in the process of emerging in our (his) time. Even if

one rejects (as I do) Hegel's claims about what he thought was occurring in his time, Hegel – perhaps more than any other "modern" philosopher – had a profound grasp of both the strong tensions and mutual dependence of *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit.* Many of the contemporary battles between those who insist upon the primacy of individual rights and those who emphasize the primacy of communal bonds stand in the shadow of Hegel's analysis of the achievements and discontents of modernity.

"Horizons" is a metaphor that has taken on increasing importance ever since Nietzsche used it in his celebrated "God is dead" passage: "How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?"[14] Since Nietzsche's time, "horizon" has assumed a life of its own. It became a central philosophic concept in the phenomenological tradition – in Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and in Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics. Throughout the following essays I play on (with) the multiple polysemic meanings of "horizon." Sometimes I use it to focus attention on what lies in the background of someone's thinking but which is never explicitly thematized. At times I use it to call attention to what always seems to be receding but nevertheless orients one's thinking. I agree with Gadamer when he tells us that "in a conversation, when we have discovered the other person's standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible without our necessarily having to agree with him."[15] "Horizon" also has a normative aura, for example when we speak of a loss of horizon or an enlargement of one's horizon. The use of the plural "horizom" is important because I do not think that there is a single all-encompassing ethical-political horizon of "modernity/postmodernity" but rather an irreducible plurality of horizons. It will become clear why I have skeptical doubts about the way in which Gadamer speaks of the "fusion of horizons." For "fusion" does not do adequate justice to those ruptures that dis-turb our attempts to reconcile different ethical-political horizons.

Throughout I have placed "modernity/postmodernity" in scare quotes to signal that it must be used with extreme caution. Anyone with even the most superficial acquaintance with recent debates can scarcely avoid noticing that the terms "modernity" and "postmodernity" are slippery, vague, and ambiguous. They have wildly different meanings within different cultural disciplines and even within the same discipline. There is

no consensus or agreement about the multiple meanings of these treacherous terms. Furthermore there is the paradox that many thinkers who are labeled "postmodern" by others, do not think of themselves as "postmodern" or even use this expression. For example, when asked to name "postmodern" thinkers I suspect many would include Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, and perhaps Nietzsche. But none of them ever rely on this term. For reasons that I set forth, I think it is best to use the expression "modern/postmodern" to signify what Heidegger calls a *Stimmung*, a mood – one which is amorphous, protean, and shifting but which nevertheless exerts a powerful influence on the ways in which we think, act, and experience. So when I speak of "modernity/postmodernity," it is primarily this *Stimmung* that I want to elicit.

Although the essays in this volume deal with a variety of different problems, themes, and thinkers, they are intended to support a thesis about the *Stimmung* of "modernity/postmodernity." I want to show that there has been a dialectical development at work. Initially it appears that ethical-political questions about *praxis* are excluded and marginalized. In the early writings of Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault and Rorty these questions do not even *seem* to be considered. Yet as we follow the pathways of their thinking and writings something curious begins to happen – for each of these thinkers begins to gravitate more and more to confronting the ethical-political consequences of their own thinking. I do not think this is merely contingent or accidental but rather a dialectical consequence of the questions they themselves raise. Like the "return of the repressed" we will see how and why their thinking necessitates this turn. And this dialectical turn has a much broader and deeper significance. For the "modern/postmodern" *Stimmung* compels us to confront anew the classic Socratic question, "How one should live."

Understanding the "modern/postmodern" *Stimmung* in this way, where ethical-political questions come into the foreground of our horizons, can help explain why Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* caused such a stir when it first appeared and has given rise to so much controversy.[16] For whatever one thinks of his characterization of "postmodern" (I think it is both too narrow and contentious) he did touch upon a vital intellectual nerve when he "pushed" ethical-political questions

into the foreground. There is an analogy between the appearance of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). In retrospect we can see that many of Kuhn's claims about science were – so to speak – in the air. Nevertheless the rhetorical force of his monograph and the controversy it generated were due to Kuhn's gift for articulating and bringing together in a focused manner what many other scholars were saying and exploring. So too, Lyotard's monograph achieved its rhetorical force because he succinctly gave expression to something that was increasingly in the air – the need to confront ethical-political concerns that had been emerging in the "modern/postmodern" *Stimmung*.

This collection of essays is not quite the book that I intended to write when I began working on it. My plan was first to write a number of independent essays, experiments, what Hannah Arendt calls "exercises," in order to approach issues and thinkers from a variety of perspectives. My original plan was to rewrite essays in order to relate a coherent narrative – to fill in gaps and supply transitions. But every time I attempted to unify the essays into an integrated whole, I was frustrated. I felt that I was attempting a "forced reconciliation" – seeking to reduce the elements that resisted reduction. It was only gradually that I came to realize that there was a reason for this – that my claims about the new constellation were self-referential – that I too had to resist the temptation to reduce the changing elements to a "common denominator, essential core, or genernative principle." Nevertheless this is not a miscellaneous collection of independent essays. They are all variations on the same or similar themes. They interweave and even at times repeat motifs. Some passages are repeated in order to emphasize the continuities of these essays. They are all shaped by a horizon from which I seek to understand the ethical-political consequences and deficiencies of the "modern/postmodern" *Stimmung*.

When editing these essays for publication I discovered something of which I had not been fully aware when I originally wrote them. There are two essays explicitly devoted to the work of Richard Rorty, but a discussion of Rorty crops up in many of the other essays. Rorty has been a dialogical partner and friend for more than forty years since we were both undergraduates at the University of Chicago. On several occasions we have

engaged in public debates. We share a great deal although we have had our disagreements. Both of us draw our inspiration from the American pragmatic movement. (My first book dealt with John Dewey, and Rorty calls himself a "Deweyean pragmatist.")[17] Nevertheless we each emphasize very different aspects of the pragmatic legacy. So my frequent discussions and allusions to Rorty can be read as an ongoing *Auseinandersetzung* where what is at issue is the ethical-political consequences of this common pragmatic legacy. The sharpness of my critique of Rorty's recent work in these essays must be seen within the context of our common bonds.

NOTES

1 *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*: *Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 2.

2 Ibid.

3 "What is the Difference that Makes a Difference? Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty," reprinted in *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pp. 86–93.

4 Ibid, p. 92.

5 See my critical discussion of Heidegger, "Heidegger on Humanism," reprinted in *Philosophical Profiles*.

6 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 385.

7 Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," *Margins*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 136.

8 See my discussion of Gadamer in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*.

9 *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. xiii.

10 Jacques Derrida, "Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in Richard Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 118.

11 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

12 Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 14–15.

13 Ibid.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 181 (paragraph 125). See also *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), especially the second essay.

15 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edn, trans, and revised J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 303. See Gadamer's perceptive discussion of "horizon," pp. 300–307.

16 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

17 See Richard J. Bernstein, *John Dewey* (1966; reprinted Atascadero, Cal.: Ridgeview, 1981).

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Philosophy, History, and Critique

In her preface to *Between Past and Future*, Hannah Arendt imaginatively interprets a parable by Franz Kafka. Kafka's parable reads as follows:

He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.[1]

Arendt's interpretation of this parable illuminates the gap in which the activity of thinking takes place – thinking that is situated in "a battleground on which the forces of the past and the future clash with each other." It is in this gap that the experience of thinking occurs – thinking that must be practiced and exercised over and over again but which knows no finality.

Kafka's parable is sufficiently rich so that it can be interpreted as a parable of the relation of philosophy to its past, to its history. For just as the "He" of the parable gains his identity in the battle with the two antagonists, so I want to suggest that this is the situation of philosophy. While it may dream of jumping out of the fighting line and achieving the position of a neutral umpire, it is an illusory dream. And like Kant's analysis of dialectical illusion, and Wittgenstein's Tractarian understanding of the limits of language, even when we are dimly aware that we cannot break out

of these limits, that we cannot "jump out of the fighting line," we are still tempted to try. We never escape the battlefield in which there is always uneasy resolution and unresolved tension. It is a battle that is fraught with different types of dangers and illusions. For there is the illusion that philosophy can once and for all cut itself off from its past, jump out of its own history – something it never succeeds in doing. If it could, it would simply disappear and lose its identity. And there is the illusion of imagining that it can completely identify itself with its past, an illusion which, if it could be realized, would also mean a loss of its identity. For its proper place, its *topos* is always in the gap, and in fighting the battle between past and future.

When the danger is perceived as being overwhelmed by its past, philosophy fights back. We see this moment exemplified by Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, and more recently by logical positivists and analytic philosophers. At such moments philosophers are prone to make a sharp distinction between "doing philosophy" and the history of philosophy, with the confidence that once we hit on the right method, discover the way of making philosophy into a rigorous discipline, then we can simply abandon to antiquarians what appears to be the "dead weight" of the past. At such moments the history of philosophy is viewed with extreme suspicion, a repository of confusions and obscurities, an endless battleground of competing opinions with no resolution, a trap that can ensnare us. We need to make a break with the past; we need to forget in order to get on with the serious endeavor of philosophizing. And there are times when there is a backlash against the pretensions of the ahistorical character of philosophy, when we realize that even the boldest attempts to break with history fail, when we see how even those philosophers who thought that they were laying entirely new foundations for philosophy are themselves deeply marked by prejudices and biases which they have inherited from the very past that they have been battling. At such moments there is sometimes the temptation to claim that philosophy itself is nothing but the history of philosophy – a stance which ironically is itself unhistorical insofar as it tends to forget that there would be no history of philosophy unless philosophers themselves (who make this history) thought of themselves as breaking with the past.

I do not think that this unstable, in-between status of philosophy is a cause for despair, but rather that it is the *topos* in which philosophy always dwells. It would only be a cause for despair if we had reason to think that there can be an end to the battle, that philosophy could and should achieve the position of a neutral umpire. The quest for certainty, the search for an Archimedean point which can serve as a foundation for philosophy, the aspiration to see the world aright *sub specie aeternitatis*, the metaphysics of presence where we desire to break out of the endless process of signification and interpretation and face reality with immediacy and directness, are all variations on the dream of "He" to jump out of the fighting line. And even if we judge these attempts to fail in their ultimate objective, we do a serious injustice to philosophy if we fail to realize how much is achieved and illuminated in these failed attempts. Philosophers – especially since the beginnings of modern philosophy – have been plagued by the anxiety that unless we can discover fixed, indubitable foundations, we are confronted with intellectual and moral chaos, radical skepticism, and self-defeating relativism – a situation that is metaphorically described by Descartes when he says it is "as if I had all of a sudden fallen into very deep water [and] I am so disconcerted that I can neither make certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support myself on the surface."[2] In another context I have labeled this anxiety "the Cartesian Anxiety" and have argued that it is an anxiety that needs to be exorcized, that can only be cured by a type of philosophic therapy.[3] But here I want to focus on the critical space of this unstable gap between philosophy and its past. For the theme that I want to explore is the way in which an appeal to history (and not just the history of philosophy) serves a *critical* function in the battle of philosophy. It is not simply that we locate the critical function of philosophy in those moments when philosophy fights back and seeks to push back its past, but also in those moments when this process is reversed, when we appeal to history and the history of philosophy in order to uncover, challenge, and criticize current prejudgments and prejudices – prejudices that can run so deep that we are not even aware of them as uncritical biases. I do not want to suggest that this is the only function which the study of history of philosophy can serve, but it is a function which I think has not always been fully appreciated. So let me turn to

several attempts and several different ways in which the appeal to history has been used critically in our contemporary situation.

The uses of history for philosophic critique

The two major philosophic movements of the twentieth century have prided themselves on their ahistorical thrust, and both initially helped to foster a deep suspicion of the positive role that the study of history might play for philosophy. In this respect, both analytic philosophy and phenomenology were true heirs of the Cartesian bias. Both in very different ways sought to rid us once and for all from what they took to be the dangers of historicism and to delineate ways in which philosophy might "finally" become a rigorous discipline that would no longer be burdened by past errors and dead ends. This anti-historical animus was no less fundamental for Frege and Husserl than it was for later logical positivists and conceptual analysts. To the extent that either movement showed an interest in the history of philosophy, it was motivated by the desire to show how what was valuable and viable in this tradition could be interpreted as seeing through a glass darkly what now was supposedly seen so perspicaciously – to show how the task of philosophy, properly understood, could correct the mistakes and confusions of the past.

Although I think parallel stories can be told about the breakdown of the anti-historical bias of analytic philosophy and phenomenology, a breakdown which can be seen as a "return of the repressed," I want to focus on the development of analytic philosophy and some of its recent critics. Analytic philosophy as a style of philosophizing has undergone many internal transformations from its early origins in logical positivism and the writings of Russell and Moore. But even when we follow its sometimes tortuous paths and its diverse currents from positivism to ordinary-language analysis to the philosophy of language and formal semantics, the anti-historical bias of this style of philosophizing has persisted. Recently, however, there are many signs of the breakup of the hegemony of analytic philosophy. Even a generation ago there seemed to be an optimistic confidence among many analytic philosophers that philosophy had finally discovered its proper subject matter, its problems and its procedures, so that

genuine progress could be made in solving or dissolving philosophic problems. But even among the staunchest defenders of analytic philosophy this confidence is now seriously questioned. Recently there have been a growing number of critiques of the presuppositions, unquestioned assumptions, and metaphors that have characterized so much of contemporary analytic philosophy.

Two of the most forceful and controversial critics of analytic philosophy have been Richard Rorty and Alasdair MacIntyre. Philosophers are frequently insensitive to the criticisms of "outsiders," but what has disturbed (or delighted) so many philosophers is that both Rorty and MacIntyre are "insiders." I do not simply mean that they have established their credentials as professional philosophers, but more specifically that each has contributed to discussions which have been in the foreground of analytic philosophy. But the distinctive feature of their recent critiques is the use that they make of history in carrying out these critiques. Rorty, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,[4] not only "goes after" the pretensions of analytic philosophy, he also seeks to deconstruct what he calls the "Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian" tradition, and the obsession with epistemology and foundationalism that he takes to be characteristic of so much of modern philosophy. Rorty typically begins his critiques with a "softening-up" strategy in which he shows his dexterity in picking apart the typical argumentative strategies that have been valorized by analytic philosophers. But the subversive quality of his critique soon becomes evident, for he is calling into question just this adversarial, argumentative style of philosophizing. He wants to dig deeper and come to some understanding of why philosophers engage in the language games that they do. And this requires a historical critique, a type of genealogical unmasking where we become aware of the historical accidents and contingencies that shape what we frequently take to be intuitive and self-evident.

One of the many spinoffs of Rorty's reflections is a distinctive (and controversial) interpretation of how the history of philosophy has developed. He rejects the view that there are perennial problems of philosophy which arise as soon as we reflect. He is equally relentless in his criticism of a variant of this, where we take the more charitable and self-congratulatory attitude that our philosophic ancestors were dealing with

basic problems, but the trouble is that they lacked the proper conceptual tools for solving them. His alternative, which can be seen as a novel blending of themes suggested by Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Kuhn, and Feyerabend, may be stated as follows. There are moments in history when, because of all sorts of historical accidents – like what is going on in some part of culture such as science or religion – a new set of metaphors, distinctions, and problems is invented and captures the imagination of followers. For a time, when a particular philosophic language game gets entrenched, it sets the direction for "normal" philosophizing. After a while, because of some other historical accidents – like the appearance of a new genius or just plain boredom and sterility – another cluster of metaphors, distinctions, and problems usurps the place of what is now a dying tradition. At first the abnormal talk of some new genius may be dismissed as idiosyncratic, as not being "genuine" or "serious" philosophy. But sometimes this abnormal talk will set philosophy in new directions. We must resist the Whiggish temptation to rewrite the history of philosophy in our own image – where we see our predecessors as "really" treating what we now take to be fundamental problems. The crucial point for Rorty is to realize that a philosophical paradigm does *not* displace a former one because it can better formulate the legitimate problems of a prior paradigm; rather, because of a set of historical contingencies, it nudges the former paradigm aside. This is what happened in the seventeenth century when within a relatively short period of time the entire tradition of scholasticism collapsed and no longer seemed to have much point. After such a revolution or upheaval occurs, philosophers have a difficult time figuring out the point of the elaborate language game that had evolved. While Rorty refuses to make predictions, he certainly suggests that this is likely to happen again with modern philosophy and its offspring, analytic philosophy. To understand a historical movement such as analytic philosophy, we must uncover the metaphors, distinctions, and problems that characterize its form of normal philosophizing, and this requires historical digging into how a distinctive type of problematic was invented.

I do not want to suggest that I uncritically accept Rorty's understanding of how the history of philosophy develops, or rather moves by fits and starts. There is plenty to criticize in the specific genealogies that he

elaborates. But I do want to highlight the seriousness (and playfulness) of Rorty's critique, for if he is right then many analytic philosophers are self-deceived in what they think they are doing – solving and dissolving the "genuine" problems of philosophy. In this context the most important point to emphasize is that Rorty's forays into the history of philosophy and the normal philosophizing of analytic philosophers is primarily critical in its intent. His historical analyses are intended to uncover prejudgments and prejudices, to expose their historical contingencies. At the very least, he forces us to ask new sorts of questions about just what analytic philosophers are doing, and these critical questions could not even be raised without a historical perspective on the present.

MacIntyre, who has been critical of Rorty's historical interpretations and more generally Rorty's conception of the history of philosophy, makes an even more ambitious use of history in his critique of contemporary moral philosophy in *After Virtue*. In the main, Rorty restricts himself to the history of philosophy. But in a quasi-Hegelian manner, MacIntyre thinks that if we want to understand philosophy and its history, we can only properly make sense of it in terms of more pervasive themes in culture and society. This is evidenced in the way in which he examines emotivism. For emotivism is not just a curious minor chapter in the history of moral philosophy. We can argumentatively show why an emotivist theory of meaning is mistaken, but this does not yet touch what MacIntyre takes to be a more fundamental issue. For he claims that,

> to a large degree people now think, talk, and act *as if* emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be. Emotivism has become embodied in our culture. But of course in saying this I am not merely contending that morality is not what it once was, but also and more importantly that what once was morality has to a large degree disappeared … and that this marks a degeneration, a grave cultural loss.[5]

MacIntyre seeks to show us that emotivism has become embodied in our culture and sketches a historical account of just how this came to be – a historical account which is not meant to be neutral but rather has the critical intent of showing us why this is a degeneration and a cultural loss. A degeneration from what? From what MacIntyre calls the "tradition of the virtues" – a tradition that began long before Aristotle, but where Aristotle's ethical and political writings are the canonical texts, a tradition which

according to MacIntyre continued to develop creatively through the Middle Ages. If MacIntyre is to complete his narrative argument, it is not sufficient simply to describe and evoke the memory of this tradition. He must also defend it. To use his own words, he seeks to make "the rational case" for a tradition in which the Aristotelian ethical and political texts are canonical. The Aristotelian tradition of the virtues must be "rationally vindicated." According to MacIntyre's narrative it was the Enlightenment project of seeking to justify moral principles that bears a great deal of the responsibility for the "catastrophe" of the collapse of the tradition of the virtues. This Enlightenment project, when unmasked – as it was by Nietzsche – ineluctably leads to emotivism. According to MacIntyre we are confronted with a grand Either/Or.

> *Either* one must follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic *or* one must hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have been commenced in the first place. There is no third alternative.[6]

Once again, in citing MacIntyre, my main point is not to endorse what he is claiming, but to highlight another variation of the way in which the appeal to history can serve a critical philosophical function.[7] To anticipate a point that I want to emphasize later in this essay, MacIntyre's own historical critique of contemporary morality and moral philosophy itself demands a close critical examination of his "rational vindication" of the Aristotelian tradition. To return to Kafka's parable, both Rorty and MacIntyre help us to see how "He" uses one antagonist in his fight with the second, how the appeal to history can enable us to think critically in the gap between past and future. But "He" must give battle to both antagonists. Rorty and MacIntyre are not just telling us likely stories that are intended to make sense of our present predicament. They are making claims to validity, claims which have an implicit future reference and which must themselves be subjected to careful scrutiny and evaluation. In carrying out this critical task, an appeal to the past, to the history of philosophy, or to a more general cultural and social history is never sufficient. But before dealing more explicitly with the doubly critical character of the fight of philosophy, I