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On Transforming Philosophy

I

Moritz Schlick, a martyred founder of logical positivism, wrote in 1930 a programmatic essay, "The Turning Point in Philosophy." It articulated what, for that time, was a conception of a radical transformation of philosophy.¹ Gesturing at what I have argued for in a series of articles and in a forthcoming book *Transforming Philosophy After the Demise of The Tradition*, I shall here in the same programmatic spirit as Schlick, though with a very different content, set out a brief for a radical transformation of philosophy.²

I shall argue first for the end of philosophy as it has been traditionally conceived. This means an end to metaphysical inquiry, to epistemology at least as a foundationalist enterprise and to a parallel foundationalist ethical theorizing. Along with the philosophy of logic, which often serves as a handmaiden to metaphysics, these activities have come to be our central philosophical preoccupations. With varying stresses and emphases, they have been at the centre of philosophy throughout its history. It is no small thing, and it is a thing that should give a person pause, to try to alter this. Yet it is my considered conviction that we are much in need of such an alteration. When we become fully aware, I shall contend, of the anti-foundationalist thrust of the best work in analytical philosophy, namely the work of Moore, Wittgenstein, Quine, Putnam and Davidson, we should come to see that, for all its august heritage, it is time that The Tradition close up shop. But this does not leave philosophy just with the history of ideas, philosophy as conversation (a form of witty kibitzing) or a reduction of philosophy to logic where it is thought that there are the logicians and then there are the lotus-eaters. I shall, in contrast to this, defend a transformation of philosophy into philosophy-as-critical-social the-

ory. On such a conception, philosophy is in a thorough and indissoluble partnership with the human sciences and ceases, as do these separate sciences, to be an autonomous discipline. Such a critical theory has neo-Marxist Frankfurt-school forms, pragmatist forms, Marxist and Marxian forms (including analytical Marxist forms) and feminist forms. (I do not deny that there can be combinations here such as Marxist feminism or Marxian pragmatist combinations.) I shall not here be concerned with explicating and advocating a particular form. Rather I shall be concerned with the more general contours, rationale and import of such a transformation of philosophy. I shall begin, however, with some discussion of The Tradition and with some reasons for saying goodbye to it. I shall then articulate and do something to justify a program of philosophy-as-critical theory. It is, as I have remarked, a radical transformation of philosophy but at the same time it captures something of one of the oldest and most persistent motives that has driven us to philosophize. But let us start with a little tradition-bashing, first with metaphysics and ontology and then I shall turn my jaundiced gaze on foundationalist epistemology.

II

There are philosophers who even now want to be ontologically serious: to do, that is, metaphysics. We need, they tell us, to see the world rightly and to do this we must work out a fundamental ontology which will display the very most basic features that the world must have. This is not a matter of careful experimental investigation linked with adroit and imaginative theory design, but a matter, or in some way essentially a matter, of pure rigorous thought. Pure disciplined philosophical reflection will yield the basic categories and constituents of the world, its deep underlying structure.

It seems to me that people who think this way have learned nothing from history. It is far too late in the day to think something like this. If, beyond truisms (e.g. things tend to persist through time), many of which may be true, but hardly require philosophy for their rational acceptance, we want to know what the basic features of the world are, we should go to physics and to its allied sciences. That, of course, will not quench the philosophical thirst for certainty. Indeed nothing non-illusory will. What physics tells us now and what physics (if it is still around) will tell us two hundred years from now is very likely to be significantly different. If that is anxiety-arousing we just need to learn to live with it.

The whole thrust of our intellectual history since the Enlightenment, including very fundamentally the empiricist and Kantian revolutions in philosophy with what in effect are their continuation in logical positivism and linguistic philosophy, together with the importantly different turnings by the pragmatists and by Quine, Davidson, Wittgenstein and Habermas, has, in the way it has added up, taught us the inescapability of fallibilism and the impossibility or at the very least the non-necessity of foundationalism. It has also made apparent to us why the steady demystification of the world is not an arbitrary shift in the *Weltgeist* and why that has made it second nature, in those touched by the Enlightenment, to, as Peirce put it, accept the authority of science rather than that of religion or philosophy in fixing belief concerning what is and might become the case. It is way too late in the day to be ontologically serious. Such activities invite (depending on temperament) either a yawn or Kierkegaardian, Derridan or Rortyan irony.

It is not correct to say that the above reveals the scientific attitude: what science cannot tell us humankind cannot know. It does not commit us to scientism for it says nothing about how we come to know how we ought to respond to other people or what sort of life-plans to form for ourselves or anything like that. It is not even necessarily about the human sciences (studies) where it is at least arguable that we should go in a much more Habermasian or hermeneutical way. It is rather about how we determine what is the fundamental stuff, the furniture of the universe, if you will, and how we make reasonable judgments about how the world (the non-human world, if you will) works and hangs together.

Scientific cosmology for all I know may be shot through with scientific mythology and may have (if this is not pleonastic) all sorts of bad metaphysical residues in it. If that is so then philosophical analysis in the standard debunking ways should clean that Augean stable, thereby, in a modest underlabourer way, helping science to gain a more adequate cosmology. But philosophy can never replace scientific cosmology, provide a foundationalist underpinning for it, or go beyond it and show us, at long last, what the world is really and truly like and (perhaps) must be like.

This is indeed a scepticism about certain traditional claims of philosophy—a rejection of going on about ontology—but not at all a general or global scepticism for it is cheerfully confident about the capacities of a developing science to give us a reasonable fallibilistic account of what there is. Fallibilism—an eschewing of the quest for

certainty, an unrepentant, non-nostalgia for the Absolute—is not scepticism. Ontological commitments are in fact religiose. The old link of philosophy with religion dies hard even with those contemporary atheists who also have a philosophical itch.

III

However, it is not only metaphysics that is to be set aside as a relic of another age but epistemology as well and most particularly foundationalist epistemology. Foundationalism comes in two species: classical foundationalism and modest foundationalism. I shall examine them in that order.

Classical 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 culture (including science). These basic beliefs must be self-evident and yield certain knowledge. In fine, classical foundationalism must provide an ahistorical, indubitable Archimedean point which can be used for assessing all other beliefs including scientific, moral and political beliefs as well as the deliverances of common sense. Such beliefs or the propositions which express them, if indeed there are any such beliefs or propositions, would provide the “foundations for knowledge.” But there are very good reasons to believe there are no such propositions and no such foundations. The various candidates offered turn out either to not be certain or not be robust enough to build a critique of culture on, as is the case with “Redness here now” or “Pain here now.” The last two examples, it should be added, fail to meet foundationalist requirements in another way for they are not self-contained as the references to “here” and “now” betray. We need to know a lot of other things to know what “here” and “now” mean and how they link up with the world. So these sentences or the thoughts they express are not self-contained yielders of certainty. Moreover, to hold, as classical foundationalists do, that the only beliefs which are properly basic or foundational are beliefs which are self-evident, incorrigible reports of experience or are evident to the senses is to land yourself in a self-referential paradox that cannot but undermine your account. That very formulation of classical foundationalism, its other difficulties aside, is self-refuting for it is itself neither self-evident, evident to the senses, an incorrigible report of experience nor deducible from such propositions or inductively justified by them. In fine, classical foundationalism hoists itself with its own petard.

A more modest foundationalism abandons the quest for certainty. It does not seek foundational beliefs or propositions which are self-evident or indubitable deliverances of the senses or propositions which are in any sense certain. In that way it has come to terms with fallibilism. But the modest foundationalist does take a set of beliefs or propositions to be foundational in that all other beliefs, if they are to be justified, must somehow be based on them. Again there is no consensus on what beliefs, if any, could fit that description, no agreed on philosophical method for discovering such beliefs and no clear conception of what sense of "based on" we are appealing to. Moreover, it has a mistaken conception of how our beliefs are held. This is so because it has an isolationist building-block conception of belief or belief formation where beliefs are taken and justified, shown to be true or warranted, one by one, as if they stood independently of one another and could be justified independently of each other. Rather our beliefs are deeply embedded in a web of belief and as such are inextricably interconnected. Moreover, we have no understanding of what it would be like to justify the whole web of beliefs together beyond showing them to be consistent or to show them (if indeed such a thing is possible) all to be false. But any one belief—any belief you like—could, of course, be false. Doubt should only occur, as Peirce powerfully argued, when inquiry is blocked and we have some real, live doubt. Systematic Cartesian methodological doubt is feckless. When we actually have some particular reason (some genuine specific reason) to query a given belief, we can show it to be justified (if it is) by showing that it coheres well with the other beliefs or we show it to be unjustified by showing it cannot be consistently held with the other beliefs or that it in some other way does not fit with them. We seek, in our quest for justification, a coherent and consistent set of beliefs.

Some of our beliefs in this web of belief are more deeply embedded than other beliefs. They are our most firmly held considered convictions and judgments and would be the last beliefs to be abandoned in seeking to render our belief-system consistent and coherent. But they are still not foundational beliefs for they are at least in principle open to revision or even abandonment if they come to conflict with too many other beliefs.³ We do not seek to isolate a set of such considered convictions as basic beliefs and then base everything else on them. Rather justification is a much more holistic affair in which we seek to show a belief-system to be justified by showing that the various beliefs fit together into a consistent and coherent set. If we can show that our particular beliefs make such a fit we can show they are justified and to

the extent we can actually do just that: show, that is, our belief-system to be consistent and coherent, we can show the belief-system to be justified.

By showing that this is the way we do justify beliefs, and that this practice makes sense, we can set aside foundationalism, classical and non-classical, and with that the very epistemological enterprise of justifying "the foundations of knowledge." We need to come to recognize that such an account rests on a myth: the myth of foundations. There are no fact-like entities just waiting there in the world for beliefs, thoughts, propositions or sentences to be compared to or to correspond with. There are objects, events and processes in the world and indeed natural kinds (rabbits, for example) but there are no fact-like entities for sentences to correspond to. More than that, as William James used to like to stress and as Richard Rorty repeats, we do not even have a coherent conception of what such a comparison or correspondence could come to.⁴ We do not know what it is like for a proposition or a belief to correspond or fail to correspond to reality. We do not, some uncashable metaphors apart, have the slightest idea of what we are talking about here. Yet the beliefs in coherent systems of beliefs are not any the less rational or objective for all of that for they are justified by showing that they form a consistent web of belief.

It has not infrequently been said that philosophy on such a turning has escaped the errors of foundationalism only to fall into the relativistic errors of coherentism. Cannot there plainly be different and inconsistent systems or at least incommensurable consistent systems? If coherence or consistency is our fundamental criterion for deciding which beliefs are justified we can have no grounds for accepting or rejecting one consistent belief-system rather than another or, even on the level of particular beliefs, belief A in consistent system Y rather than belief B in consistent system Z. Anti-foundationalist coherentists such as Neurath, Quine, Davidson and Putnam regard themselves as defending an objective conception of belief and truth but it looks like this cannot be done if we abandon foundationalism—or so the objection runs.

A relativism is not a consequence of such a coherentism. To speak of a "belief-system," as I have, though conventional enough, is perhaps in some ways a misleading choice of words for the web of belief I am talking about. Such a web of belief is not like a bounded axiomatic system. Moreover, differing belief-systems are not like alternative geometries or like distinct mapping devices of those "conceptual schemes." We have, where actual map making is in question, literally

different systems of map making which, with their different systems of projection, differently characterize the earth: something to which we indeed have independent access. But we have no coherent conception of conceptual scheme and content where we allegedly have overall conceptual schemes and an undifferentiated reality only accessible by these conceptual schemes. We have a picture here, a picture which Davidson argues is an incoherent picture. With such a picture, we have in effect, in Kantian fashion, an invocation of an unknowable noumenal world which our differing conceptual schemes (somehow standing free of the world) in categorizing "cut up" in diverse ways. We have the schemes (the conceptual systems) and the undifferentiated reality. And we have in such a circumstance no possible Archimedean point in accordance with which rationally to ground our claims that one "cutting up" or categorization is more adequate than another. But, as Davidson well argues, that very underlying conception, with its cookie-cutter analogy, is incoherent.⁵ We think it makes sense because in the back of our minds we have a picture of literal map-making where we do have independent access to what is mapped. But with scheme/content there is nothing analogous.

Some of our beliefs are no doubt false and *some* may even be incoherent (belief in God or in witchcraft-substance may be such beliefs) and *some* of our conceptualizations may be confused. But all of them could not be false, incoherent or confused for if that were so we could not even spot the falsity, incoherence or confusion. The very idea of their all being false together is incoherent. Something, as Wittgenstein used to like to say, must stand fast while the other parts move. *Global* scepticism is nonsense. Moreover, while some of our conceptions of the world are confused, they still are conceptions of the world in which we abide, for there is, like it or not, no other place to be.⁶ To think otherwise is incoherent. There is and can be no problem of "the external world" (Schlick in his early programmatic essays rightly saw it to be a pseudo-problem) and there can be no Kantian problem of scheme and content.

IV

It is also not the case that our coherentism is *simply* concerned with consistent belief-systems and thus must face the problem of absurd consistent belief-systems or equally consistent but distinct and perhaps even conflicting consistent belief-systems where on coherentist criteria these belief-systems cannot but be equally justified. This is not a

problem for the kind of coherentism I am defending, a coherentism starting with a web of belief which is our web of beliefs anchored in the part or parts of the world, physical and cultural, with which we are familiar. In this open-ended, unbounded web of belief certain beliefs (moral as well as factual) are more deeply embedded than others. We give more weight to them and they will be less readily abandoned than other beliefs. While remaining, as we have seen, non-foundational, revisable and even abandonable, they are still for us very fundamental. A system of consistent beliefs which did not contain them would, simply *qua* consistent system of beliefs, be judged less adequate by us than one which contained them.

The “by us” indeed refers to a community or cluster of communities at a given time and place and “the seeing” with which we do it is unavoidably through things seen by our lights. That is by the community or communities we are. This again, of course, raises the spectre of relativism or at least historicism. For it may be the case that some, or perhaps even all, of these deeply embedded considered judgments may be culturally or historically eccentric. It is, of course, very unlikely, indeed impossible, if Davidson is right, that all of them will be but it is surely to be expected that some are. But again no one of these beliefs—not a single one—is sacrosanct. Any one of them can be and will be, or at least should be, given up if this belief conflicts with enough of our other beliefs.

Suppose we come in contact with another culture with beliefs which in some pervasive way conflict with a very central belief or cluster of beliefs of ours. In such a circumstance—and this happens not infrequently—their web of belief and ours get, at least to a certain extent, intertwined. If we are at all reasonable or if we are in a situation where we must seek a *modus vivendi*, we will seek a mutual understanding and a coming to terms with each other, different as we are, adjusting beliefs in relation to other beliefs, as we do in intercultural circumstances as well, until we get what we take to be (and sometimes not unreasonably) a consistent set.⁷ Only this time we do it across cultures. We do it, that is, intraculturally. In the doing of this we *may* in the end either modify or abandon that central belief of ours to gain a more consistent set with everything else we believe and think. Indeed this is what will eventually happen when this central belief of ours is plainly and unquestionably in such conflict.

We proceed interculturally in the same way, or at least in much the same way, as we proceed intraculturally. In Neurath’s famous metaphor, we rebuild the ship at sea plank by plank having no Archime-

dean point on which to stand. There is no problem of relativism or historicism here. We start from contingently given historical points—where else would or could we start?—but we need not end with those points. Where people, across various cultures, meet, exchange views, sometimes confront each other and sometimes engage in cultural borrowing, there is not infrequently gain all around. It is not simply whiggish to believe a more adequate and more comprehensive view will emerge if we persistently seek, as historically speaking we do, to get the melange of beliefs into a web (a coherent structure of belief) and into a consistent and comprehensive web.⁸ Coherentism does not entail or even contextually imply relativism or historicism or anything that might disturb those modernist believers in the Enlightenment. (Though I speak of an Enlightenment chastened by the counter-Enlightenment.⁹ It is a considerable distance from Condorcet to Habermas.)

V

I have argued against epistemological foundationalism classical and modest. This, of course, is to argue against the central core of the modern tradition in philosophy. Diverse strands in our intellectual culture, and with different rationales, from Nietzsche to Neurath, from Hägerström to Heidegger and from Davidson to Derrida, have rejected, more or less firmly, this modern tradition and indeed beyond this the whole classical tradition. They have rejected, that is, the doing of metaphysics and ontology and the attempt, through the articulation of an epistemology, to give “foundations of knowledge” which would give us a yardstick to assess culture. Here we have the normative claims of epistemology. These proud claims of philosophy have been shown to rest on illusions. In that very general way we are all Comtians—even the most postmodern of the postmodernists among us. Philosophy must give up its ancient claim to have found “the real foundations” of science and the life-world. The illusion has been that we could get such foundations if we can only at long last get our metaphysics and epistemology right. But there is no coherent account of getting things right here. There is no such strictly philosophical account that will finally enable us correctly to see how things hang together and perhaps, as well, will enable us to make sense of our lives or at least more reasonably to orient our lives. Philosophy cannot be the overseer of culture, the adjudicator of knowledge-claims and it cannot usher in the sciences to their proper places and demarcate them from the rest of

culture. It lacks the conceptual tools and the body of distinctive "philosophical knowledge" (whatever that means) and articulation of principles to do that. It cannot, its ancient claims and present ambivalent self-image to the contrary notwithstanding, be the arbiter of culture, clearly, or even unclearly, distinguishing in a *general and ahistorical* way, between what is rational or reasonable and irrational or unreasonable to believe and do. Philosophy is in no position to tell us what is the truth or even what are the more significant truths or even how we are to go about making such discoveries. Indeed, it may be the case that there, as far as "*the Truth*" is concerned, is nothing to be discovered here. We don't even know what we are talking about when we are talking about "*the Truth*."

VI

Is there anything left for philosophy to be after the demise of The Tradition? Let us start by trying to see philosophy as social critique or as cultural criticism: philosophy, as popular belief would have it, as speaking to the problems of the age. The task of philosophy, on such a conception, should be to come to grips, in a way that is both reflective and disciplined, with the pressing problems of life. For us, standing where we are now, this means examining questions about abortion, euthanasia, privacy, pornography, about what love between persons can come to, given a tolerably clear understanding of ourselves, the rights of children, animal rights, sexism, racism, nuclear warfare, the ideological uses of science and the media, exploitation, imperialism, questions about what democracy can come to in our industrial societies, moral questions about the workplace, questions about what education should be at various levels in our societies, questions about inequality, autonomy and self-ownership, broad questions about the choice between socialism and capitalism, reform and revolution, market and plan, and questions about the ethics of terrorism. These questions are certainly not the perennial questions of philosophy, if indeed there are any perennial questions. But, as the pragmatists have insistently argued, there is real work for philosophy to do in examining these questions critically, analytically and intelligently.¹⁰

However, institutional philosophical self-advertisement to the contrary notwithstanding, we now need a good dose of scepticism. How can philosophers *as philosophers* be of any use here? They might, if they also just happen to be knowledgeable, reflective, clearheaded and sensitive persons (only the clearheadedness necessarily going with

philosophical expertise) have something useful to say, but how does their being *philosophers* help? Does being a philosopher help at all? Foundationalism is out and so *moral* foundationalism is out. This being so, there is little we can expect in the way of help from classical moral theories, e.g. the things Kant, Mill, Sidgwick, Moore and Ross did, as considerable as their achievements were. And there is little in the way of bright new conceptual tools that will enable a philosopher bent on being an underlabourer to be of much help in discussing such issues. Being clear about entailment, supervenience, rigid designators or the naturalistic fallacy will not be of much help here. It looks, at least, as if there is little in the way of distinctive disciplinary expertise that will be useful in the facing of these pressing human problems, though being soaked in the history of thought about morality and politics, as, say, Isaiah Berlin, H.L.A. Hart and John Rawls are, will be something of a not inconsiderable value. Such historical knowledge will deepen the sensibilities and understanding of an already sensitive and reflective person. But those things are not the same as having some distinctive analytical techniques or philosophical expertise. We should be very sceptical, as Richard Rorty is, about whether there are any such things that could be of any value in facing such very fundamental and live moral questions.¹¹

What then should philosophy, in seeking to transform itself, do? While keeping these human problems firmly in mind, though at the same time trying to see them somehow comprehensively and within limits holistically, and by distancing itself from the perennial problems of philosophy, philosophy should seek to become a critical theory of society.¹² It should give up all pretensions to autonomy and to having an overseer role and should instead interlock itself fully with the human sciences. In such a partnership with these human sciences it should also remain or become (as the case may be), deconstructionism to the contrary notwithstanding, sensitive to the insights into the human condition embedded in literature. Such a critical theory, while being argument-based as well as having a narrative structure, should be an emancipatory theory. As such it should seek to aid in the providing of guidance in the repeated attempts we, if you will, luckless mortals make to give some sense to our lives. This, of course, includes giving some sense to our lives together. In persevering in this we should come to see, as far as we can, in our time and place, with whatever real possibilities we have before us, what would be the best sorts of lives for us to live, including, of course, what forms of community would be most desirable.¹³ In doing this we should place this normative picture

in a larger framework in terms of which we try in some way to see how things hang together, though here I am not trying to reintroduce cosmology by the back door. This goes back to an ancient folk-conception of philosophy and is not rendered in the least problematic by the demise of The Tradition. What I want to see is whether something with the same ends or very similar ends as this folk-conception of philosophy, but more rigorous, more attentive to conceptual clarification (but only where needed), more argument-based and more discipline-oriented, could be programmatically articulated and then developed.

It is this that I have in mind when I speak of philosophy-as-critical-social-theory. It is a social theory and not a cosmological theory—physics can get along very well on its own without any help from philosophy—which, in an integrated way, is a descriptive-explanatory social theory, an interpretive social theory and a normative critique. The whole theory, as Marxists would put it, is *praxis*-oriented and is done with an emancipatory intent though there is no attempt, as there was *not* in Marx, to change the world without understanding it. It will be a through and through naturalistic and empirical theory, eschewing transcendental arguments and, of course, foundationalism. And it will be at least moderately holistic. Elements of the social sciences will loom large, though it is possible, given the importance of giving a narrative account of who we were, are and who we might become, that much of the social science utilized will be rather historiographical.¹⁴ Indeed, because of the importance of narrative in achieving such understanding, that narrative aspect might loom very large indeed.

In carrying out this programme, in theory construction and the very practice of critical theory, elements of analytical philosophy will sometimes play an important role in the clarification of key concepts, the display of logical implications of certain hypotheses and conceptions, in the perspicuous arrangement of parts of the theory and in general by being, from time to time, reflexive about what is being done, though a philosopher who is not also soaked in the human sciences will be of little use here. Cleverness, attention to distinctions and a knowledge of logic is not enough. We have had enough of what C.D. Broad called “clever sillies” in philosophy; but there are, I am sorry to report, elective affinities between the discipline and such people.

Philosophy-as-critical-theory to be such must be emancipatory.¹⁵ Perhaps no theory can do this but then there will be no critical theory. If such a theory can really be developed in a sound manner, it will help us not only to see better who we were, are and might become, it will, as

well, where there actually are alternatives, help us to see who we might better become and what kind of a society would be a more humane society in which there would be a more extensive human flourishing or at least where the conditions would be in place which would make that genuinely possible.

Such a theory is not, *pace* Jean-Francois Lyotard, a grand meta-narrative and it is not, *pace* Jon Elster, a teleological theory of history.¹⁶ Though it will have a narrative structure, it is not in anyway a grand *a prioristic* philosophy of history. The days for such Spenglerian endeavours are, thankfully, long since past. While being holistic and comprehensive in scope, philosophy-as-critical-theory will be a genuinely empirical-cum-theoretical theory with appropriate testing constraints. It will be both an interpretive and a descriptive-explanatory theory showing us the structure of society, the range of its feasible transformations and the mechanics or modalities of its transformation. On its normative side (a normative side that will be fully mindful of its empirical side), it will seek to provide, and with the degree of contextuality appropriate, a rational justification for saying, of the various possible social transformations, which transformation is the better transformation. It will take a long and critical look at our actual social practices, social systems, ways of life, our actual social economic structures, including our actual capitalisms and socialisms: real capitalisms and real socialisms which may not have much in the way of a human face. It will also look, more abstractly and theoretically conceived, at what a capitalist system, a socialist system and their technocratic alternatives have the potential for becoming and will attempt to make some assessment of these abstractly conceived social systems against the prospects for human emancipation.¹⁷

Critical theory in all of its various forms, including its Marxist and Feminist forms, is a project of modernity, growing out of the Enlightenment. It is presently under vigorous postmodernist attack from Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Rorty. (Habermas has, however, vigorously counter-attacked.)¹⁸ The response from Foucault and Rorty is, I believe, the most interesting. Their critique of modernity does not involve a rejection of the ideals of the Enlightenment, though it does involve a jettisoning of much of its meta-talk and a contextualistic chastening of it, much in the spirit of pragmatism.

Such postmodernist critics, or for that matter anyone else, have good reason to be suspicious of holistic theories of such vast scope and with such ambitions.¹⁹ They can very easily turn into grand *a priori* theories of history which are deeply ideologically scarred. All social

theories have, of course, a *proneness* to being ideological but that they have this proneness does not mean that they will actually succumb.²⁰ Similar things obtain for their losing their empirical constraints.

Critical social theory can and indeed should be at one and the same time comprehensive, holistic and empirically testable, interpretive and emancipatory, causally explanatory and normative with the normative side being rooted in the coherentist method of appealing to considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium both in theory construction and in the articulation of ideals and of principles of morality.²¹ We start with, and, at least initially, justificatorily appeal to the considered convictions of whatever cultural traditions happen to have been socialized into our very marrow. Reflecting back on them, we first seek to eliminate those considered convictions which would not jibe with a fair appraisal of the facts, would not be held in a cool hour and when we are not fatigued, drunk, under strain and the like. We seek, as part of our critical theory, to get a consistent set of such considered judgments, eliminating one or another of whatever conflicting judgments remain by seeing which of them adheres best with our other considered judgments, with our background beliefs, more generalized factual assessments and the like. When, after such winnowing, we still have some remaining conflicting considered convictions, we should stick with the conviction or consistent subset of convictions that have the *strongest appeal* when we take them to heart and agonize over which to hold on to. These last considerations, of course, bring in the sentiments. But, as David Hume and Adam Smith so well saw, it is folly to think that in the domain of the moral we can, or indeed should even try to, bypass appeals to sentiment. But here sentiment is not the ultimate or final appeal. It is not that, when push comes to shove, we must simply appeal to our preferences. There is, on a coherentist account, no ultimate or final appeal. The sentiments are rather one element in a cluster of considerations that we seek to place in a coherent and consistent whole.

Getting such an initial set (perhaps cluster would be the better, less scientific, word) we try to construct general principles or see if there are in our tradition already extant general principles which will account for our holding them and, as well, interpret them. (These principles may themselves be higher level considered judgments.) But these principles will also have a justificatory role. (But they also will *not* be ultimate.) If there are considered judgments from our set of more concrete considered judgments which conflict among themselves but one is in accordance with one of these higher order principles and

the other is not, then, *ceteris paribus*, we should accept the more specific considered judgment that is in accordance with the higher order principle and reject the other conflicting more specific considered judgment. It is also the case, as we have seen, that some considered judgments are more firmly assented to than others. They have a greater pull on our reflective sentiments. Consider what we should do when we have half-considered judgments: judgments that we are tempted to hold on some grounds and to reject on others—judgments that is, that we are less sure of though still tempted by. If that half-considered judgment can be seen to conflict with a higher order moral principle that squares with a lot of firmly held specific considered judgments and with other higher order moral principles as well, then we have a very good reason to at least modify that half-considered judgment until it coheres with the rest, and, if we cannot get it in such a pattern of coherence, to reject it. However, if we have a higher order moral principle that conflicts with a great mass of lower level very deeply entrenched considered judgments, as perhaps the principle of utility does, then, again, *ceteris paribus*, we have a good reason to reject the higher order principle.

We shuttle back and forth, as John Rawls puts it, until we get these various elements in an equilibrium with which, on reflection, we wish to stick.²² We extend this to *wide* reflective equilibrium when we add various background theories and principles, standardly empirical-cum-theoretical theories, such as theories about social structure, theories about social change, about the function(s) of morality, ideology or the economy, theories of the person and the like. We seek in a similar way to shuttle back and forth between considered judgments, moral principles, moral theories and social theories (and perhaps other theories as well) until we get a coherent package that would meet our reflective expectations and hopes: a, for a time, but only for a time, 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 them. There can be no simple stepping out of our societies and traditions—the lifeworld that we are part of—to just be rational agents, moral agents, or political animals *überhaupt*. We will never be without our more or less local identities, though they need not ethnocentrically hobble us. The very idea of being just a representative of humanity 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 and whole traditions, plank by plank, can be transformed as we repair and even rebuild 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 social theory or its generalized naturalistic 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.

Philosophy-as-critical theory will contain, as we have seen, a normative side, utilizing an appeal to considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium, though something like that (as Putnam stresses) will be used in other parts of the theory as well.²³ But such a procedure and such an appeal is crucial in providing a grounding and a rationale for the moral principles and ideals appealed to in the critical social theory.

Frankfurt School critical theory in effect appealed to various ideals and moral principles and treated them, rightly enough I believe, as an integral part of their critical theory, yet they had no rationale for the moral principles appealed to. My account, while also integrating the moral ideals and principles into the overall critical theory, seeks to provide, with the method of wide reflective equilibrium, a firm, though fallibilistic, rationale for these principles and ideals. Philosophy-as-critical-theory does, in an integrated way, clarificatory, descriptive, interpretive, explanatory and normative work. This, of course, is a lot and it is not unreasonable to be sceptical about its success. But there are no *a priori* roadblocks or incoherences, no conceptual booby traps, in such a proposal and in such a theory which would cripple it from the outset. In giving a reasonably rigorous rational reconstruction of the hopes of that ur-philosophy that is folk-philosophy, it affords a generous rationale for philosophy and a real point to doing it, even after the demise of The Tradition with its rationalistic preoccupation with metaphysics and epistemology in The Tradition's futile attempt to provide foundations of a type and a kind that we cannot have and can reasonably do without.

NOTES

1. Moritz Schlick, "The Turning Point in Philosophy" in A.J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), pp. 53-9. See also his "Positivism and Realism" (1932/3) in the same volume, particularly pp. 86-87.
2. Kai Nielsen, "Rorty and the Self-Image of Philosophy," *International Studies in Philosophy* XVIII:1 (1986), 19-28; Kai Nielsen, "How to be Sceptical About Philosophy," *Philosophy* 61:235 (1986), 83-93; Kai Nielsen, "The Withering Away of The Tradition," *Philosophia* (1988); Kai Nielsen, "Can there be Progress in Philosophy?" *Metaphilosophy* 18:1 (1987), 1-30; Kai Nielsen, "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy," *Inquiry* 29:3 (1986), 277-304; and Kai Nielsen, *Transforming Philosophy After the Demise of the Tradition* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1989).
3. "Too many" cannot be stated with exactitude. We must not look for an algorithm here.
4. William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1981), 92. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 160-75 and Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth" in Ernest LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 333-355.
5. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 183-98.
6. C.B. Martin, "The New Cartesianism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1984), 236-258.
7. Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 116-133.
8. W.V. Quine and J.S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1970).
9. Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 1-24 and 162-187.
10. John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy" in *Creative Intelligence* (New York: Holt, 1917); John Dewey, *Intelligence in the Modern Worlds* (New York: The Modern Library, 1939); John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957); and John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1960).
11. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 211-232.
12. Nielsen, "Scientism, Pragmatism and the Fate of Philosophy" and "Can There be Progress in Philosophy." See my discussion of Jürgen Habermas on critical theory, including his conception of emancipation. Nielsen, "Emancipatory Social Science and Social Critique" in Daniel Callahan and Bruce Jennings (eds.), *Ethics, the Social Sciences and Policy Analysis* (New York: Plenum Press, 1983), 113-160.
13. Kai Nielsen, "Linguistic Philosophy and 'The Meaning of Life'" in E.D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981), 177-204.
14. Charles Taylor, "Use and Abuse of Theory" in Anthony Parel (ed.), *Ideology, Philosophy and Politics* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1983), 37-60. See also Kai Nielsen, "Are Moral Beliefs Ideological Deceptions?" in Bhikhu Parekh and Thomas Pantham (eds.), *Political Discourse* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1987), 82-96.
15. Nielsen, "Emancipatory Social Science and Social Critique," 113-160.
16. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* translated by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) and Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 107-118.
17. Andrew Levine makes a good start at this in his *Arguing for Socialism* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
18. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). For a kind of postmodernist response see Alexander Nehamas, "The Erds of Thought," *The New Republic* 199:22 (May, 1988), 32-36. See also the exchange between Rorty and Habermas in Richard Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985), 161-175 and 192-198.
19. Frederick Crews, *Skeptical Engagements* (New York: Oxford U P, 1986), 137-178.
20. Charles Taylor, "Use and Abuse of Theory," 37-60.
21. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U P, 1971) 19-21, 48-51, 577-87; "The Independence of Moral Theory," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 48 (1974-75) 5-22, 7-10. Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979) 256-82; "Moral Theory and Plasticity of Persons," *The Monist* 62 (1979) 265-87; "On Some

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- Jane English, "Ethics and Science," *Proceedings of the XVI World Congress of Philosophy*.
- Marsha Hanen "Justification as Coherence" in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *Law, Morality and Rights* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983) 67-92.
- Kai Nielsen, "On Needing a Moral Theory: Rationality, Considered Judgements and the Grounding of Morality," *Metaphilosophy* 13 (1982) 97-116; "Considered Judgements Again," *Human Studies* 5 (1982) 109-18; and *Equality and Liberty* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), Chapter 2; "Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective" in E. Simpson (ed.), *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning* (Edmonton, Alberta: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987) 143-164; and "In Defense of Wide Reflective Equilibrium" in D. Odegard (ed.), *Ethics and Justification* (Edmonton, Alberta: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1988) 19-37.
22. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 19-21, 48-51.
23. Hilary Putnam, *Realism and Reason* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1983) 229-247. For more on critical theory and wide reflective equilibrium see my "Philosophy as Critical Theory," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, supplement to 61:1 (September, 1987) 89-108 and my "On Sticking With Considered Judgements in Wide Reflective Equilibrium," *Philosophia, Tidsskrift for filosofi* (Denmark), 316-321.