

**CONTEXT AND SOCIAL CRITICISM**

**THE PROBLEM OF CONTEXT  
IN  
THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT  
AND  
POLITICAL THEORY**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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## ABSTRACT

'Context' presents a challenge to political theory *per se*. In the history of political thought contextualism has severed historical from political and theoretical questions. In Marxism contextualism is thought of as a means to criticise ideas and institutions, but also as providing grounds for rejecting political theory itself as ideological. Communitarians have argued that contextual considerations are compatible with those of morality, but that they count against the sort of abstraction from our concrete, culturally constituted, selves which liberal impartiality requires.

This thesis will, firstly, determine in what sense we may be said to be 'situated' in particular contexts, i.e. cultures and traditions, and then work out what implications 'situation' might have for politics and political theory? Secondly, what role might socio-historical contextualisation play as social criticism?

I argue that existing conceptions of situation and of contextual social criticism are prey to socio-historical reductionism and/or a social solipsism, and are incompatible with impartiality and deliberative politics.

A more appropriate conception of situation is one based on a conceptual pluralism that maintains the idea of an irreducible plurality of standpoints which we may adopt with respect to the world and our place in it. We need not choose once and for all between a socio-historical view of ourselves and the more abstract view required by impartialist morality. I argue that this novel view of situation and context can deepen our understanding of deliberative politics by showing how public reason must be conceived in terms of providing justifications acceptable to citizens who are differently situated with respect to one another. Socio-historical contextualisation can then play a role in deliberative politics without the risk of communitarian parochialism.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE PROBLEM OF CONTEXT

This thesis advances a distinctively pragmatic account of interpretation in order to set out an understanding of context and of social criticism which is compatible with liberal egalitarian politics. The argument is unusual to the extent that it seeks to overcome the commonly opposed claims of context and of impartiality. The claim advanced in this thesis is that, with the right understanding of context and interpretation, we can give due weight to context and situation without compromising critical morality. This avoids the communitarian deployment of context in support of an ethical parochialism, on one hand, but also refuses to accept the commonly held liberal belief that context is at best incidental to the conduct of normative deliberations, and at worst, that its influence on morality is pernicious. I argue that, properly understood, impartial public deliberation will *require* a concern with context in the shape of an interpretive social criticism.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of context is a problem for a liberal egalitarian political outlook which is committed to a critical morality and a deliberative politics. 'Contextualism' may be said to have two facets: one ontological, and the other theoretical. The ontological thrust of contextualism presents us as beings who are 'situated' in particular contexts not of our choosing, which serve to constitute our identities and perspectives.<sup>2</sup> This 'thick' understanding of identity or selfhood is contrasted with the

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Barry sets out the traditional opposition of liberals to the encroachments of contextualism in the opening pages of *Justice as Impartiality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). He argues that central tenets of contextualism, such as the belief in 'the homogeneity of belief systems within societies and the mutual incomprehensibility of belief systems between societies,' tend to undermine commitment to universalist morality. Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p.5. Some liberals, notably David Miller and Will Kymlicka have sought to accommodate the concerns of contextualists, but they have focused on its relation to questions of justice, rather than on political deliberation, as I do here. See David Miller, *On Nationality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> For the ontological character of modern hermeneutics see Hans Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975); *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, D. E. Linge (trans.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); *Reason in an Age of Science*, (1976) Frederick Lawrence (trans.)



implausibly 'thin' 'universalist' understanding of selfhood said to be typical of the liberal egalitarian outlook.<sup>3</sup> The normative and theoretical thrust of contextualism derives from this ontological view and is directed against 'abstract' concepts and an impartial morality which is said to require of us that we step out of the situations that make us who and what we are.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, contextualism tends towards an interpretive outlook, one focused on the interpretation of particular traditions rather than on the search for universal foundations for our theoretical and practical reasoning.<sup>5</sup> We should not, however, allow ourselves to be forced to choose between contextualism and impartial, critical morality and the politics that follows from it. This thesis sets out an understanding of situation and of contextualisation which is not only compatible with liberal egalitarian politics but which shows how we can give these due weight in the conduct of such politics.

The attraction of contextualism is its realism. The idea that we are fundamentally situated beings is intuitively sound. On one hand, our identities and many of our beliefs are accidental or contingent, in the sense that we had no control over the situation we were born into: our gender, class, ethnicity, family, society, religion, etc. These contingencies, however, are central to our self-understandings.

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(Cambridge MA: MIT, 1981). See also Jean Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), and Sources of Hermeneutics, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, (London: Duckworth, 1981); Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice, (New York, Basic Books, 1983); Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). These more recent, communitarian, critics of liberalism build upon earlier criticisms of liberal individualism advanced in the Marxist and feminist traditions, e.g. C. B. Macpherson's The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), and Carole Pateman's The Sexual Contract, (Cambridge, Polity, 1988). For the differences between these criticisms of 'decontextual' liberalism see Amy Gutmann, 'Communitarian critics of liberalism,' Philosophy and Public Affairs 14 (1985), pp.308-21.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) and Thick and Thin: moral argument at home and abroad, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony Solidarity, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism.

Subtract them from our sense of who we are and there would be nothing left, merely an abstract 'person' or 'individual', no longer myself with all of my particular features. We are our particularities.<sup>6</sup> Set against this thick understanding of the sort of persons we are is the abstract liberal individual, committed to freedom from the constraints of tradition and community and to an impartial morality which demands that we exclude our particularities from moral deliberation. How can a convincing normative outlook rest on such an implausible ontology?

The sociological realism of this contextualism is problematic, however, in that it has prompted the adoption of normatively problematic views of politics and morality. The move from ontology to morality has not been persuasive.<sup>7</sup> Contextualists have inferred from the fact of situation that truth, morality and political principles are little more than social practices, relative to particular contexts.<sup>8</sup> In some versions, e.g. communitarianism, this entails the adoption of a parochial, traditionalist, moral outlook, a shrinking of the scope of moral obligation and a denial of the possibility of adopting an impartial, critical position with respect to the practices of the society one is situated in.<sup>9</sup> In other, more radical, contextualisms, e.g. those of Marx and Foucault, morality is contextualised in order to be debunked, i.e. exposed as complicit in the operation of relations of domination.<sup>10</sup> These writers, unlike the communitarians, wish to transform our situation, but cannot appeal to moral argument in order to convince people to alter their beliefs and institutions. What is needed, it will be argued, is an

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<sup>6</sup> Walzer remarks that, '[t]he crucial commonality of the human race is its particularism: we participate, all of us, in thick cultures that are our own,' Thick and Thin, p.83.

<sup>7</sup> See Charles Taylor on the error of assuming that one can move directly from one position to the other. 'Cross-purposes: the liberal-communitarian debate,' in Philosophical Arguments, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.181-205.

<sup>8</sup> See Rorty for example, in Contingency, Irony, Solidarity.

<sup>9</sup> See, in particular, Michael Walzer, Thick and Thin and Interpretation and Social Criticism.

<sup>10</sup> See Marx's famous remark that talk of justice and rights is just so much 'obsolete verbal rubbish' The Critique of the Gotha Programme, (1875) Collected Works Vol. 24 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), p.87. Foucault declares that 'For modern thought no morality is possible' in The Order of Things, (1966), (London: Tavistock, 1970), p.328.

account of situation and contextualisation which combines a convincingly thick ontology with the critical normative outlook.

A liberal egalitarian politics entails a commitment to impartiality and to a deliberative understanding of democracy.<sup>11</sup> A commitment to treating others as equals requires us to give impartial consideration to their needs and interests, and their beliefs about these needs and interests. It requires us to view our beliefs and interests impersonally, i.e. we must be resolved not to favour them simply because they are 'ours'. This translates into a commitment to a specifically deliberative conception of democracy insofar as the requirement to treat others as equals by considering their beliefs and interests impartially will require the institution of a politics which will (1) ensure the articulation of these beliefs and interests, and (2) require participants in deliberation to transform their perspectives where these are shown to be problematic from an impartial point of view.

Majoritarian democracy, while resting on formal equality, places no constraints upon the pursuit of sectional interest and to this extent it constitutes an inadequate understanding of the commitment to political equality.<sup>12</sup> The liberal component of deliberative politics is provided by the idea that persons reasonably differ on many

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<sup>11</sup> The connection between impartial justice and democratic deliberation is emphasised by John Rawls in Political Liberalism, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), and Joshua Cohen 'Deliberation and democratic consensus,' in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (eds.) The Good Polity, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp.17-34. See also Gerald Gaus Justificatory Liberalism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). For impartial justice more generally see Brian Barry Justice as Impartiality, and Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). On deliberation see John Dryzek Discursive Democracy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Deliberative Democracy and Beyond, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Also James Fishkin Democracy and Deliberation, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) and Benjamin Barber, Strong Democracy, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> This is the central theme of the work of deliberative democrats, but see also the closely related republican position of Philip Pettit who argues for an account of democratic government which reconceives the traditional opposition between liberty and democracy by presenting an account of democratic government as the exercise of republican freedom, Republicanism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). What distinguishes these anti-majoritarian arguments from those of traditional liberals is the attempt to construct a normative theory of democracy which will enable democrats to criticise tyrannical majorities. Traditional criticisms of majoritarianism, such as J. S. Mill's On Liberty, accept the opposition of liberty to democracy, something which contemporary deliberative democrats seek to overcome.

important issues, and that consequently collective authority must be exercised impartially with respect to such differences: it cannot be used to enforce a uniformity derived from a plan of life which is the subject of reasonable disagreement.<sup>13</sup> This impartiality is embodied in the requirement that collective authority only be exercised for purposes which can be publicly justified. The commitment to deliberative politics does not rest on nostalgia for a more active citizenship but rather on the egalitarian commitment to impartiality.<sup>14</sup>

Central to this conception of politics is the idea that we must justify our political proposals to others in terms to which they cannot reasonably reject.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, we must engage with the actual beliefs of our fellow citizens in order to show that a particular proposal is not simply justified in terms of our own interpretation of our beliefs, but that it is also justified in terms of *their* beliefs. The requirement to justify distinguishes which interests may be legitimately pursued from those which may not. It also ensures a large role in public deliberation for the contextualisation of belief. This combines with normative argument insofar as justification requires us to identify and interpret the beliefs of those with whom we deliberate and to arrive at judgements about the reasonableness of their arguments. Insofar as contextualisation can redescribe and problematise our interpretations of the world it can help to transform the judgements of those engaged in deliberation. The requirement of public justification is what makes the recognition of situation and the practice of contextualisation central

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<sup>13</sup> This is the formula central to Thomas Scanlon's contractualist ethics. See Scanlon, 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism,' in Bernard Williams and Amartya Sen (eds.) Utilitarianism and Beyond, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). For a discussion of how this differs from reasonable agreement see Chapter Six below.

<sup>14</sup> Some deliberative democrats, notably Benjamin Barber in his Strong Democracy, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), are not immune to a certain nostalgia for the days of Athenian democracy, and the idea that the life of the citizen is the good life, however, this is not essential to the idea of deliberative democracy. See Chapter Six where Aristotelian, epistemic and egalitarian arguments for democratic deliberation will be distinguished.

<sup>15</sup> See in particular Rawls' conception of the 'overlapping consensus' in Political Liberalism and Gaus' account of public justification in Justificatory Liberalism.

to liberal egalitarian politics and it does so in a way that does not entail a weakening of its normative requirements. Contrary to the claims of those who criticise liberal impartiality, the requirement to treat others as equals and weigh their claims impartially requires participants in democratic deliberation to attend to the fact of situation and to give the phenomenon of context due weight if public decision-making is to be genuinely impartial.<sup>16</sup>

The contextualist arguments examined here can be divided into the following categories: firstly, there are two conceptions of situation, the 'epistemic' and the hermeneutic; and secondly, there are two conceptions of social criticism, the communitarian, and the radical.<sup>17</sup> Each of these presents a different sort of challenge to the model of politics set out above. The first, the epistemic conception of situation, emphasises the plurality of perspectives to which the fact of situation in different contexts gives rise. Its special feature is its claim that certain of these perspectives are 'privileged' in some way, or that the self-understandings of situated persons are specially authoritative.<sup>18</sup> This conflicts with deliberative politics in two ways: it

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<sup>16</sup> Iris Marion Young vigorously criticises what she sees as an 'ideology' of impartiality which serves to censor the public sphere by excluding reference to particular contexts and identities. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). See also, Young, 'Communication and the other,' in Seyla Benhabib (ed.) Democracy and Difference, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 120-35.

<sup>17</sup> Feminist Standpoint Theory displays an explicit commitment to an epistemic understanding of situation, although the view of understanding which this conception of situation rests on also informs many common-sense views about cultural difference. See Nancy Hartsock's Money, Sex and Power, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985); Sandra Harding's 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: what is 'strong objectivity'?' in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.) Feminist Epistemologies, (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 49-82; Liz Stanley and Sue Wise's Breaking Out Again, (London: Routledge, 1993). For the hermeneutic understanding of situation, which rests instead upon a linguistic model of understanding, see: Gadamer, Truth and Method; Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism, and Thick and Thin; also, Rorty's Contingency, Irony, Solidarity. The latter two writers espouse a broadly communitarian version of social criticism, although they differ on the question of the point of interpretation, with Rorty adopting a more Nietzschean, poetic, view of interpretation than Walzer. The radical social critics are, of course, Marx and Foucault, with ideology critique and genealogy as their respective versions of social criticism. Where communitarian social criticism idealises shared understanding and community solidarity and continuity, radical social critics emphasise the way in which power relations are involved in the maintenance of traditions and the construction of identities. With this in mind, they aim to disrupt, rather than restore, what shared understandings there may be.

<sup>18</sup> Liz Stanley and Sue Wise take this to extremes in their Breaking Out Again, in which they undermine their own feminist aims by arguing that if a victim of domestic violence says she isn't

assumes that perspectives are inaccessible to differently situated others, and that a self-understanding 'grounded' in experience is authoritative.<sup>19</sup> The first sets a barrier to impartial deliberation insofar as we cannot judge the claims of others where we cannot be said to understand them while the second denies the possibility of transforming self-understandings insofar as it assumes that persons cannot be mistaken in their interpretation of themselves and their situation. This latter view rests on a private conception of meaning and accords 'experience' a central place in the interpretation of situation.

The hermeneutic understanding of situation, the one on which the communitarian and radical contextualisms rest, does not attack the idea of communicability, as the epistemic understanding does. It is not a condition of there being a plurality of perspectives that these be inaccessible to those who have not had the experiences which formed them. Instead, the hermeneutic idea explains plurality with reference to the ideas of language and tradition. We are situated in particular cultures with particular languages and traditions through which we come to understand ourselves. This interpretation of situation poses a problem for deliberative politics insofar as it is supposed to be incompatible with the idea that we can adopt an objective, impartial stance with respect to the traditions which have constituted our identities and perspectives.<sup>20</sup> Instead, our moral deliberations can only proceed by interpreting these shared traditions, and social criticism aims at a deeper, more authentic, understanding of who we are. While this admits that we may misinterpret

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oppressed, then we are in no position to argue with her. It is characteristic of arguments informed by an epistemic conception of situation that they rely not simply on normative premises, such as respect for another's self understanding, but also on conceptual argument to the effect that the possibility of judging another's claims is denied us by virtue of our different situation. Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.117.

<sup>19</sup> Typically, this conflict is not acknowledged by those who defend an epistemic conception of situation. Often this is because writers in this vein are addressing themselves to problems in the methodology of the social sciences, as is the case with Sandra Harding, or Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, but this is also true of the work of someone like Iris Young, who explicitly addresses the issue of the conduct of democratic politics in conditions of pluralism.

<sup>20</sup> See, in particular, Walzer, Thick and Thin.

ourselves and that we may learn from hermeneutic encounters with others, it denies the possibility of a critical morality.

Finally, radical social criticism, which, like communitarianism, regards social institutions as constitutive of our identities and beliefs, is distinguished by its critical attitude to morality *per se* and by its emphasis on the effects of power upon our self-understandings. While those who have an epistemic conception of situation, like feminist standpoint theorists, regard self-understandings as authoritative insofar as these are grounded in experience, radical social critics are concerned that these self-understandings, as the products of a context characterised by inequality, will themselves embody those oppressive power relations.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, radical social criticism emphasises the transformation of these self-understandings, not the recognition or endorsement of them. In itself, this does not present a problem for deliberative politics.<sup>22</sup> What is problematic is the way that moral concepts, insofar as they embody class interests, or simply the effects of power, are themselves understood to be part of these structures of oppression and must therefore be debunked or exposed.<sup>23</sup> This move, it is argued here, prevents radical social critics from presenting

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<sup>21</sup> Feminist critics of standpoint theory have argued that the standpoint theorists' idealisation of the maternal identity in fact plays into the hands of anti-feminists to the extent that it simply endorses the view that women are primarily mothers. See Mary Dietz, 'Context is all: feminism and theories of citizenship,' *Daedalus* 116 (1987), pp.1-24. See also Susan Hekman, 'Truth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited,' *Signs* 22 (1997), pp.341-65.

<sup>22</sup> Joshua Cohen, for example, stresses the importance of sensitivity to 'adaptive' preferences, which is to say, those preferences which reflect the conditioning of circumstances shaped by inequality. Radical critics of liberal democracy have long argued that it is wrong to assume that the expressed preferences of individuals can be taken at face value, and the Marxist theory of ideology purports to explain why it is that the working class will express preferences contrary to their interests. Cohen's account of deliberation, however, takes account of this phenomenon, and he argues that participating in deliberation can bring to light the influence of oppressive circumstances and lead participants to reformulate their preferences in the light of this knowledge. In this way a deliberative decision-making process is superior to one which relies on the registration of uninterpreted preferences. See Cohen, 'Deliberation and democratic legitimacy,' in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (eds.) *The Good Polity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp.17-34.

<sup>23</sup> Marxism has largely been superseded by models of social criticism based on Foucauldian genealogy, in response to the perceived reductionism of the Marxist concept of ideology. See Michèle Barret *The Politics of Truth*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*, (London: Hutchinson, 1986), and Terry Eagleton, *Ideology*. (London: Verso, 1991). While radical social criticism has been sensitive to reductionism in one area, namely social scientific explanation, it has remained insensitive to the sort of reductionism which disregards the claims of morality, as can be

their redescriptions as elements of larger normative arguments. Consequently, such criticism cannot play a role in deliberative politics, which is premised on the idea that we must offer others reasons, including normative reasons, for transforming their beliefs.

In order to defend the sort of impartial deliberative politics outlined above, it is necessary to advance an account of context, i.e. of situation and contextualisation, which does not conflict with it as these understandings do. These contextualisms pose two sorts of problem. One is a problem about how we understand the relationship between social and historical context and abstract, theoretical and normative reflection.<sup>24</sup> A response to this problem will focus on the way that contextual interpretation produces a relativist account of morality, by presenting it as no more than the practice of a particular social group or culture. The second sort of problem is a problem *within* morality rather than *about* it: contextualisms fall into two camps: those which deploy contextual arguments in order to argue against a 'universalism' which does not recognise the existence and validity of alternative perspectives; and those which regard both liberalism and the politics of recognition as insensitive to the way that power relations shape our identities and perspectives. These concerns conflict with each other, but both rest on a broadly egalitarian outlook and to this extent, it is argued, they must be *accommodated* by a liberal egalitarian politics.

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evidenced by Chantal Mouffe's dismissive attitude to the work of Rawls, for example. Rawls is condemned not for some particular feature of his Theory of Justice, but more generally for assuming that political theory is a branch of moral philosophy. See Mouffe, The Return of the Political, (London: Verso, 1993). See Chapter Five for a discussion of the anti-normative cast of radical social criticism and 'agonistic' politics.

<sup>24</sup> Influential historians of political thought such as John Dunn and Quentin Skinner have adopted a sceptical view of the claim that the historical contextualisation of political ideas can legitimately serve the aim of social criticism. Skinner in particular has argued that historical interpretation and social criticism can never be connected and that to attempt to do so entails a philosophical error. This claim is disputed in Chapter One. See Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas,' Philosophy 43 (1968), pp.85-104. Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas,' James Tully (ed.) Meaning and Context, (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), pp.29-67. J.G.A Pocock, who is often associated with this Cambridge-based approach to the history of political thought has shown less interest in policing the boundaries between the history of political thought and political theory, and dissents from Skinner's intention-based model of interpretation. See Politics, Language, and Time, (1971) (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989) and Virtue, Commerce, and History, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).



It is worth underlining at this point that the argument advanced here does not aim to defend the value of equality from the ground up. This is, in any case, unnecessary as what is at issue between contextualists and liberals is not the value of equality, but rather its interpretation. That is to say, that both the contextualist arguments for recognition and those which emphasise the need for transformation, are derived from a commitment to equality. Both these forms of contextualism differ from liberalism in that they do not think that impartiality is possible, or desirable; whereas, liberal egalitarians argue that treating others as equals will require us to adopt an impartial standpoint from which to weigh their claims against our own. It will be argued here not only that this latter claim is correct, but in particular, that it is possible to set out a conception of impartial public deliberation which can accommodate the legitimate concerns of contextualists with both recognition and transformation. Indeed, it is argued that *only* impartial deliberation can provide the means to determine which identities are worthy of recognition and which are in need of transformation. What is at issue, to reiterate, is the interpretation of the requirements of equality, not its value as such.

Accommodating the concerns of contextualists requires an understanding of situation and interpretation which differs significantly from those on offer at present. These threaten impartial deliberation insofar as they set out to debunk moral argument and theoretical abstraction *per se*, and impartial morality in particular, and insofar as they suppose that situation establishes a barrier to communication between differently situated persons. The understanding of context advanced out here relies first of all upon conceptual pluralism, i.e. anti-foundationalism, in order to rebuff the relativist thrust of contextualism.<sup>25</sup> This pluralism resists the attempt to show that any particular

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<sup>25</sup> While some of those criticised here also espouse an 'anti-foundationalist' position, namely, Rorty, Walzer, Foucault, and Young, it is argued in this thesis that much 'anti-foundationalism' is insufficiently pluralist, and typically accords a foundational status to particularising socio-historical categories to the exclusion of universalising descriptions and normative concepts. The emphasis on pluralism has been inspired largely by the work of Hilary Putnam, e.g. *Reason, Truth and History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). The work of these authors is distinguished by a rejection of the foundationalist claim that a particular range of description can be regarded as fundamental, the

standpoint or range of descriptions is any more fundamental than any other: the claim on which contextualism's relativism and bias against generalising abstraction rests. On this view, socio-historical descriptions have no primacy over abstract theoretical ones, nor a historical standpoint over a moral.<sup>26</sup>

The second element of this account of context is provided by a public account of meaning, in which meaning is accounted for in terms of public rule-following rather than private mental representation.<sup>27</sup> This disposes of the epistemic conception of situation and the idea that certain understandings are authoritative. It supports, by contrast, a hermeneutic understanding which rests instead on the idea that the conceptual frameworks through which we come to understand ourselves are social and historical artefacts (on a certain description). This explanation accounts for the way in which differently situated persons come to form distinct perspectives, but it does not suppose incommunicability. Because our self-understandings rest on languages and traditions which are not of our making, and which have histories of their own, we cannot be thought to be transparent to ourselves as standpoint theorists suppose. This means that our perspectives ought not be regarded as authoritative insofar as they can embody *misunderstandings* of our selves and of our interests.

Conceptual pluralism plays a significant role in this version of the hermeneutic conception of context. First of all, the plurality of identities and perspectives revealed by the hermeneutic emphasis on context and tradition are not reducible to a single foundation, but form a permanent element of reason itself. Secondly, I rely on this

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concepts of physics, for example, coupled with a rejection of the relativism to which much 'anti-foundationalism' is prey.

<sup>26</sup> Onora O'Neill argues that particularising descriptions are every bit as much abstractions as are generalising descriptions and that consequently the particularist animus against abstraction is misconceived. *Towards Justice and Virtue*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.39-44.

<sup>27</sup> The account of public meaning set out in Chapter Three is based on the discussion of rule-following in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958). For the contrast between public and private notions of meaning see Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). On the connections between the analytic philosophy of language and the continental tradition of the human sciences, see Karl Otto Apel, *Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften*. H. Hostelelie (trans.) (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1967).

pluralism to insist that the phenomenon of situation is itself always interpretable: there is no single fundamental way to understand it. For this reason we can reject relativist interpretations of it which exclude the possibility of adopting an impartial stance with respect to one's situation.

The argument of this thesis is by no means wholly negative, but rather aims at clearing away misunderstandings of situation and of interpretation in order that a better understanding of these can be constructed which can show how they may enrich, rather than undermine, impartial deliberation. The pluralist understanding of interpretation offered in this thesis can do this in two ways. First of all by redescribing identities and traditions in order to call our existing judgements about them into questions. Secondly, by providing narratives or genealogies of our current ideas and problematics themselves in order to reveal problematic elements in their construction. Contextualisation relies upon the hermeneutic idea that we are situated in such a way that our moral and theoretical perspectives and our self-understandings are not transparent. If they were, contextualisation could not bring out features of these of which we were not previously aware.

This thesis claims that while impartiality is usually thought to be diametrically opposed to the recognition of the particular identities and traditions revealed by contextualism, it actually requires an understanding of these, if not an unqualified endorsement of them, if we are to construct public justifications. This is because the requirement that public policies be publicly justifiable requires us, first of all, to be *open* to the legitimate claims of others.<sup>28</sup> This obviously rests on understanding their perspectives and self-understandings, because where needs and interests are interpretable, like everything else, we cannot simply assume that our interpretations of the needs and interests of others are sound. Indeed, we cannot be certain that we are interpreting our own needs and interests correctly. To this extent, recognition of

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<sup>28</sup> It is argued that communitarian attempts to draw normative conclusions from hermeneutics are not only parochial from the point of view of liberal cosmopolitanism, but that they fail also to do justice to Gadamer's emphasis on the importance of *openness* to others. See James Risser, Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

situation and its connection to reasonable pluralism with respect to the interpretation of value and principles is required by the obligation to deliberate with others in order to publicly justify the employment of collective authority. Equally, we cannot regard self-interpretation as privileged in any way, but must, as radical social critics insist, be sensitive to the possibility that the self-understandings of deliberating parties may be illegitimate in that they may rest on treating others as less than equals, or in the sense that they do not sustain the best interpretation of the interests of those concerned.

The conduct of impartial deliberation, it will be claimed, requires its participants not to ignore the fact of situation but rather to interpret it in order to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate claims. Contextualisation, it is argued here, forms an essential element of the process of deliberation to the extent that it can identify beliefs and explain dissent.<sup>29</sup> To this extent it bolsters the demands of recognition, but equally it can serve the aim of transformation, where impartiality requires it, by identifying and removing obstacles to the justification of certain policies through problematising the judgements of our interlocutors. In this way contextualisation is combined with critical morality in order to form a social criticism consistent with the aims of liberal egalitarianism.

Chapter One addresses arguments about context in the history of ideas and history of political thought. While these have moved away from treating context in terms of causal explanation towards a conception of context as interpretation, serving to identify beliefs, the account of the identification of beliefs current in the history of political thought is problematic insofar as it is reductive and author-centred.

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<sup>29</sup> It is wrong to claim that the liberal idea that public justification be impartial is 'apolitical', in the sense that it necessarily forecloses public debate. The pursuit of publicly justifiable policies is, on the contrary, envisaged here as a robust affair, requiring citizens not only to interpret themselves, but also to engage with the perspectives of others and to open themselves to their criticism. For the claim that 'political' liberalism, which is to say, a liberalism which stresses public justification, is 'apolitical' see for example, Jeffrey C. Isaac, Matthew F. Filner, and Jason C. Bivins, 'American Democracy and the New Christian Right: a critique of apolitical liberalism,' in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds.) *Democracy's Edges*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.222-64.

Chapter Two introduces an pluralist, antifoundationalist understanding of interpretation as providing a superior, interest driven account of contextualisation, one which does not place undue restrictions upon our interpretive projects.

Chapter Three sets out the epistemic, experience centred, account of situation found in feminist standpoint theory, and traces its connections to the politics of recognition. An alternative, public, account of meaning is set out, which counters the idea of privileged understandings and which shows how concepts may themselves be socially and historically variable, in the sense that they are features of language.

Chapter Four shows how conceptual pluralism and public meaning are combined to form a hermeneutic, i.e. language and tradition based, understanding of situation. The connection between this ontology and a relativist communitarian social criticism focused on the interpretation of shared traditions, is set out and exposed as resting on a reductive interpretation of situation. On a pluralist understanding, situation is shown to be compatible with impartial morality.

Chapter Five sets out Marxist and Foucauldian versions of social criticism. While ideology critique and genealogy differ in certain respects, both of these share a reductive socio-historical interpretation of morality, with the consequence that, as they stand, neither version of social criticism is compatible with the egalitarian requirement that criticism proceed by offering others reasons, including moral reasons, to alter their perspectives.

Chapter Six sets out a revised conception of contextualisation and situation and shows how these figure in deliberative politics. The redescriptive possibilities of adopting an objective socio-historical stance to our beliefs is harnessed to critical morality, and the normative aspects of contextualism, i.e. recognition and transformation are shown to be accommodated within a deliberative politics.

In summary, the argument of this thesis falls into two parts: firstly, a pragmatic, pluralist conception of context and of interpretation is set out. This counters reductivist theories of context and interpretation which support relativism.

Socio-historical contextualisation has featured prominently in a variety of projects of social criticism, Marxist, Foucauldian, feminist and communitarian, but this model of interpretation provides the means to avoid the reductionism which, it is argued, plagues contemporary contextualisms. The second part of the argument builds upon this innovative account of interpretation in setting out an account of the place of contextualisation in social criticism and the place of the resulting interpretive social criticism in democratic politics. While some liberals, notably Kymlicka, have sought to accommodate context and situation by giving greater weight to the identity-constituting character of traditions, others, like Brian Barry are dismissive of the weight attached to context and situation and of the parochialism which is usually associated with these.<sup>30</sup> The argument of this thesis is that impartial deliberative politics must accommodate the legitimate concerns of contextualists both with the recognition and transformation of identities and that it is impartiality itself which requires that contextualising social criticism play a central role in deliberative politics. Contextualists are wrong to reject impartiality, and liberals wrong to dismiss the significance of context. My claim then is that given the right understanding of context and interpretation, that contextualisation can play a role in social criticism, and that impartiality requires that this sort of social criticism be central to the conduct of deliberative politics.

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<sup>30</sup> Kymlicka, Liberalism, Community, and Culture, and Barry, Justice as Impartiality.

## CHAPTER ONE

### IDENTIFYING ACTS

How do we conceive of the relationship between ideas and their context? The contemporary history of political thought has moved away from a causal account of context to a 'linguistic' account which treats the ideas of political thinkers as forms of action: speech acts.<sup>1</sup> The claim is that by placing these acts in their proper, socio-historical, context we can hope to better identify the arguments concerned. There is much to recommend this 'linguistic turn', notably the way it makes historical context *internal* to an understanding of texts, where in the past it may have appeared to be little more than an incidental curiosity, with no claims on the attentions of political theorists.<sup>2</sup> This is a promising direction for a project of contextual social criticism insofar as the strong link made between understanding and context provides an excellent reason to contextualise philosophical and political concepts.

However, Skinner, in particular, sets strict limits to the interpretation of arguments. Legitimate interpretation restricts itself to the identification of the intended meanings of the authors of historical texts and Skinner explicitly rejects interpretations which focus on the unintended meanings of the arguments present in these works. This is problematic insofar as social criticism, it will be argued, relies upon precisely this sort of interpretive project. For only where texts can carry unintended meanings can they be reinterpreted, and the essence of social criticism is reinterpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> John Dunn, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas,' Philosophy 43 (1968), pp.85-104. Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas,' History and Theory 8 (1969), pp.3-53, and reproduced in Tully (ed.) Meaning and Context The page references to 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas' which follow refer to this volume. The concept of a 'speech act' is first set out in J. L. Austin, How to do things with words, (1962) J. O. Urmson (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). J. G. A. Pocock, often associated with this Cambridge-based history of political thought, has preferred to focus on political languages, rather than on individual speech acts. See Pocock, 'Verbalising a political act,' Political Theory 1 (1973), pp.27-45.

<sup>2</sup> This characterisation of the character of the contemporary history of ideas is taken from Anthony Pagden, 'Rethinking the linguistic turn: current anxieties in intellectual history,' Journal of the History of Ideas 49(1988), pp.519-29.

This chapter will examine the arguments which Dunn and Skinner advance on behalf of their closely related interpretive projects and it will conclude by contrasting their intentionalist approach with the work of another revisionist figure in the history of ideas, Michel Foucault.<sup>3</sup> Foucault not only adopts a diametrically opposed approach which deliberately avoids the focus on authorial intention, but, it will be argued, he also rests his approach on a *pluralist* understanding of interpretation. That is to say, Foucault does not exclude the possibility that alternative styles of interpretation, operating at levels other than that he has chosen, and focusing on different ranges of objects, are equally legitimate. This is not a commonly remarked on feature of Foucault's 'archaeology' and, it will be argued in Chapter Five, it is not an insight which he follows consistently. However, it will be argued that this pluralist direction is one which an adequate account of context and interpretation must take.

### *Context and Causality*

John Dunn argues that the history of ideas is insufficiently historical, dealing only with 'reified abstractions' like Empiricism and Rationalism, rather than with the ideas of 'real' men arguing in actual concrete contexts.<sup>4</sup> To take these empty abstractions as one's theme is to neglect the fact that intellectual matters are really just

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<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, (1969) A. M. Sheridan Smith (trans.), (London: Pantheon, 1972).

<sup>4</sup>John Dunn, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas.' C. B. Macpherson could be said to have provoked this debate with his attempt to trace the problems of contemporary liberalism back to their roots in the seventeenth century claiming that the 'possessive individualist' assumptions of market society were 'embedded' in the founding texts of liberalism, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Peter Laslett's critical introduction to Locke's Two Treatises of Government, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), is important for its presentation of Locke as a radical rather than a *post facto* ideologue of the Glorious Revolution. John Dunn was completing a study of Locke at the time that Alan Ryan published his response to the historical critique of liberalism. Dunn: The Political Thought of John Locke, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Ryan: 'Locke and the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie,' Political Studies 13 (1965), pp.219-230. In this article Ryan opined that philosophers had little to learn from historians, prompting John Dunn's attempt to rebut this claim in 'The identity of the history of ideas.'



'complicated instances' of the 'social activities' of talking and thinking, activities which must be understood in their proper social and historical context. Rather as Marx claimed to have turned Hegel the right way up, Dunn wishes to set the history of ideas upon its feet. The second flaw of the history of ideas is that despite its abstraction, it is nonetheless philosophically weak, characteristically avoiding any attempt to form judgements as to the truth or falsity of the ideas under consideration. While one might be inclined to think that the solution to the problem is that students of ideas should be clearer about whether their interests are historical or philosophical and focus their attention accordingly, Dunn rejects this sort of solution apparently because it seems to suggest that historical criticism would then have no purchase upon the philosopher and *vice versa*. In order to avoid such mutual disinterest Dunn suggests that the proper view is that no account of an idea is complete unless it meets both philosophical and historical requirements, and he proposes to show that this must be so.<sup>5</sup>

Dunn's argument is dogged by an unfortunate ambiguity, however. He purports to show that historians cannot avoid being philosophers, and *vice versa*, but his actual argument turns out to have a very much more limited scope: it concerns the relationship between two types of historical explanation, rational and causal, and purports to show that the former necessarily relies upon the latter. When he turns to the relationship between this newly reconceptualised history, and the philosophical appraisal of the ideas concerned, he runs into difficulties. On one hand, he makes no attempt to show that historians must be philosophers, suggesting that a historical understanding has some sort of priority over philosophical understanding, and on the other, he finds himself admitting that history and philosophy have different objects,

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<sup>5</sup> '1, that the completion of both types of investigation [historical and philosophical] is a necessary preliminary to the construction of an indefeasible explanation of either type; 2, that a sensitive exercise of both types of explanation and a realisation of the sort of problems which an audience would have in following the story will tend to produce a convergence of tactic in this pursuit; that a rational explanation of a past philosophical dilemma, a causal explanation of a past philosopher's enterprise and an account of either of these rendered intelligible to an ignorant layman will display a considerable symmetry of form and that most of the unsatisfactory features of the history of ideas comes [sic] from its notable lack of resemblance to any such form.' Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.86-7.

such that historians and philosophers cannot really be said to be talking about the same things in any case. At the heart of this puzzle is the problem of identifying an act, a problem subsequently taken up by Quentin Skinner, although no longer with the aim of uniting historians and philosophers. Finding the right way to approach this problem is the key to the problem of context. Dunn's strategy is interesting however for it tries to accommodate a certain pluralism by denying that 'rational' as opposed to causal explanation, or historical, as opposed to philosophical studies, can stand alone as the correct account of an argument. Instead, we must combine these to form a *complete* account.

I will take Dunn's argument about rational and causal explanations first and then consider his difficulties with the relation between philosophy and history. 'Rational' and 'causal' explanation are both forms of historical explanation. 'Rational' history is initially characterised by Dunn as concerned with 'giving reasons for why an argument seems cogent in the past.'<sup>6</sup> Each has its own limitations according to Dunn. Causal history, he suggests, is unable to explain why Plato criticises Thrasymachus, while rational history, for its part, is unable to explain 'why the Roman Empire in the West collapsed'.

On the basis of this recognition of the limitations of each form of explanation, Dunn suggests that instead of regarding them as diametrically opposed forms of explanation, they should rather be regarded as complementary. Dunn considers it a grave mistake to attempt to replace one with the other, and argues that, in the history of ideas,

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<sup>6</sup>The terms are taken from an earlier debate about the place of Hempel's Covering Law explanation within history, involving William Dray, Patrick Gardiner, Alan Donagan and others. See in particular: Dray's *Laws and Explanation in History*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1957) and his 'Explanatory narrative in history,' *The Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1954), pp.15-27; Gardiner's 'The objects of historical knowledge,' *Philosophy* 28 (1952), pp.211-20; and Donagan's 'The verification of historical theses,' *The Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1954), pp.15-27. Dunn simply dismisses the partisans of narrative as 'idealist'. Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.89.

...most abstract methodological arguments in the subject depend upon an effort to make one of the two descriptions of the act all important and the other trivial. They err in proffering one description as the overriding, the *correct* description of the performance in the place of the other.<sup>7</sup>

The point at issue for Dunn is to determine what is the relationship between the meaning of an idea and the circumstances of its birth. Rational historians will deny that these circumstances are in any way relevant. Proponents of causal explanation, on the other hand, will eclipse the ideas themselves, by stressing only the conditions of their genesis. Dunn argues that causal explanation, while a necessary component of a *full* understanding of a statement, is clearly not a necessary condition of understanding that statement. Such an explanation could 'only give at best the necessary and sufficient conditions of its occurrence. It cannot give any account of its truth status.'<sup>8</sup> Equally, a philosophical account of a statement would fall short of a full account insofar as it neglected the 'stimulus conditions' of that statement's utterance. Dunn concludes that, 'the only account of a past philosophical performance which could be said to be complete at any one time must comprise the complete Skinnerian [B. F.] story of its genesis *and* the best available assessment of its truth status.'<sup>9</sup>

Dunn then argues that each form of explanation gives rise to its own style of historiography. There is, first of all, the philosophical history of ideas: a 'history of philosophy,' concerned with a 'set of argued propositions in the past.' More specifically: 'All the statements contained in it are statements about the relationships of propositions to propositions. Men, breathing, excreting, hating, mocking, never

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<sup>7</sup>Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.91.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.90.

<sup>9</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.91.

step inside it.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere it is characterised as 'a Platonic activity which has been extricated belatedly from causality, deodorised, anaesthetised, pure...'<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the 'historical' version of the history of ideas is a 'history of philosophising.' This takes as its subject matter 'the set of activities in which men are engaged when they enunciated these propositions.'<sup>12</sup> This history, then, is the history of philosophy as a social activity. It is Dunn's aim to argue that *both* forms of explanation have their place in a complete account. As indicated above, Dunn is not wholly even-handed in his account of their mutual relations and his argument can best be regarded as one which seeks to place limits to rational explanation. When distinguishing between rational and causal history, Dunn dismisses rational history as merely a 'story,' and, as such, not a form of explanation capable of explaining social change.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Dunn seems to conceive of rational history, i.e. the history of philosophy, as dependent upon the history of philosophising, i.e. causal explanation, as it is the former, left to its own devices, which is the greatest source of confusion in the history of ideas: 'the causal story, in so far as we can still discover it, has always to be elaborated first.'<sup>14</sup>

Dunn's argument for the necessity of causal history as a foundation for rational history hinges on the idea that it can help us to avoid certain types of misunderstanding. There are, Dunn says, three ways in which one can misunderstand what someone has said:

The meaning one attributes to his words may not be a meaning that can be properly attributed to them in his public language... the meaning

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<sup>10</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.92.

<sup>11</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.97.

<sup>12</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.92.

<sup>13</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.89.

<sup>14</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.97.

that one attributes to them may not have been that which he intended them to bear. The meaning that one attributes to his act in saying them may be mistaken.<sup>15</sup>

The first two cases are deemed relatively unimportant, and are rapidly dismissed by Dunn. He makes it clear that the rational historian is usually well enough equipped to overcome these first two forms of misunderstanding. The third, however, is said to differ from the preceding two types of misunderstanding insofar as it is a misunderstanding of an *act*. Identifying 'what Socrates said' is equivalent to establishing, 'not just what words he used, but what he was saying in using them - what he meant.' Here the rational historian will balk, for the explanation of action is not customarily taken to be relevant to the business of elucidating what someone has said.<sup>16</sup>

Dunn's argument is that this view is mistaken: 'There are occasions on which one cannot know what a man means unless one knows what he is doing.'<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it is causal explanation that a rational historian must turn to if he is to discover what a man was doing, and hence, what he meant. In order to demonstrate that this is so, Dunn appeals to J. L. Austin's notion of 'speech-acts'. Austin had argued that 'saying' could also be 'doing'. Rather like Wittgenstein, Austin argued that philosophers had concentrated on the use of language to make statements at the expense of the multiple other uses of language.<sup>18</sup> In fact language is often used to

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<sup>15</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.93.

<sup>16</sup> It is not clear how the third misunderstanding differs from the second. Both are examples of mistakes about intended meaning, and the point of introducing the idea of speech acts is to show that the second may be described as the third.

<sup>17</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.93.

<sup>18</sup> J. L. Austin, How to do things with words. As John Searle has pointed out, Austin's account of the performative dimension of language ultimately undermines his own constative/performative distinction, as the making of statements is itself a performance. See Searle, 'A taxonomy of illocutionary acts,' in Expression and Meaning, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

perform, rather than simply describe, or report on, actions. To say, 'I promise' is in the appropriate circumstances to perform the act of promising. Of course, in other situations, this same pair of words can mean different things: it can be uttered, for example, by a teacher in the course of an English class, as a joke, or by an actor in the course of a play. In these circumstances this utterance would not have the 'force' of a promise, although its propositional content remains constant. The distinction between meaning and force is meant to capture the situation in which a sentence, the propositional content of which remains constant, nevertheless can be said to mean different things in different contexts. Incidentally, while Austin distinguished between performative and non-performative utterances, Searle has pointed out that even making a statement, i.e. asserting a proposition, is itself to perform an illocutionary act with the force of an assertion such that ultimately, the distinction between performative and non-performative utterances collapses. To name the force of an utterance is usually taken to be equivalent to naming the act which has been performed.<sup>19</sup>

Dunn supports his claim with an example in which a person parodies an argument which he finds personally repugnant:

Suppose a person were to give a parody of the sort of argument normally produced in favour of a position which he particularly detests - say, in an argument about the justification for punishing homosexual acts as such, to describe an alleged causal relationship between changes in the sexual mores of the Roman aristocracy and the military collapse of the Roman empire in the West. If, at the end of the impassioned and sneering recital, a listener were to be asked what the speaker in question had said, it might be possible for him to provide a full record of the words used and in the correct order and with perfect

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Strawson, 'Intention and convention in speech acts,' in Logico-Linguistic Papers, (London: Methuen, 1971).

understanding of the rules for the use for each particular word and yet still not have *understood* what was said. Of course, such a misapprehension could readily be described as a failure to grasp what the speaker was doing in saying those words; and this is clearly an apt description. But it does seem at least equally natural to describe it as not understanding 'what he was saying'. 'Doing things with words' *is* saying things, just as saying things is doing things with words. Parody or even irony are not just acts which hold the world at a respectful distance. They are ways of saying things about the world.<sup>20</sup>

Dunn argues that by attending to the words alone, the rational historian would utterly mistake the speaker's meaning. By contrast, a causal explanation of what he was doing 'in' saying these words ensures the correct identification of what was meant. In this way causal history is shown to be necessary if misunderstandings are to be avoided.

This is an interesting strategy for forcing casual explanation upon the rational historian, and thereby preventing him from misidentifying the meaning of historical arguments. It is not, however, a successful strategy. First of all, one must reflect on the scope of Dunn's argument. He advances an argument which apparently demonstrates that ironic utterances may only be correctly identified by causal explanation. Even if this were a successful argument, Dunn would still need to provide reasons for thinking that ironic utterances were sufficiently widespread in the history of philosophy to justify the elaboration in *all* cases, of precautionary causal explanations. Alternatively, he would need to show how causal explanation can contribute to the understanding of a wider range of utterances than the simply ironic.

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<sup>20</sup> Dunn argues that while one could ask what someone was, 'doing in saying those words', one could equally be concerned with "what he was saying", p.94. This, of course, is to get Austin's theory back to front. Similarly Dunn argues, again in direct opposition to Austin, that acts such as parody and irony, 'are ways of saying things about the world,' which directly counters Austin's explicit distinction between descriptive, or 'constative' statements, and performatives, i.e. speech-acts. How to do things with words, Lecture 1. See Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', pp.93-4.

A more pressing theoretical difficulty with Dunn's account is that he does not provide a clear account of the role of causal explanation in the 'identification' of speech-acts. Dunn does not refer to a Covering Law. There is no reference to any repetition of such performances, by this speaker, or others, which might form the basis for an inductive generalisation. Neither dispositions, ends, nor motives are explicitly referred to. Similarly, while Dunn had previously identified knowledge of 'the conditioning-history and the set of present stimulus conditions'<sup>21</sup> as essential, perhaps even sufficient, to a causal explanation, there is no attempt to detail what these are in this instance.<sup>22</sup> To the question, 'what caused this action?' Dunn has, apparently, no answer.<sup>23</sup>

Even if he had, it would remain to be shown that providing such an explanation identified the act in question. Indeed, it appears that 'explanation' and 'identification' are taken to be synonymous, which is surely the point to be established. In fact it seems more plausible to say that one must first identify an act before one might look for its causes. In addition it seems a perverse use of Austin's theory to take it as a means to extend causal explanation to the understanding of speech. It would appear, rather, that Austin's theory shows that there is a class of actions which are not to be identified with actions in the physical world: the usual source of examples in these debates. There is doubtless a causal explanation of some sort to be given, for example, for the action of raising my arm, and this is also true of the physical aspect of speaking, i.e. the production of sounds. However, Austin distinguished *this* act from speech acts proper, of which he identified three main classes: locutionary, illocutionary, and

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<sup>21</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.90.

<sup>22</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.90.

<sup>23</sup> In addition, Davidson's means of introducing non-Covering Law causal explanation in to the explanation of action is not open to Dunn. Davidson argues that responses to the 'why?' requests could take the form of 'because' statements, and that these were sufficient explanations, even in the absence of explicit reference to any Covering Law. However, Dunn clearly linked 'why?' requests to 'rational' explanation and could consequently only adopt Davidson's suggestion at the cost of renouncing the dualism which he had proposed as a means of solving the dispute over historical understanding. Donald Davidson, 'Actions, reasons, and causes,' in Essays on Actions and Events, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.3-20.



perlocutionary. It is not at all clear how causal explanation is related to *these* acts. It is more accurate to regard Austin as having shown how ways of speaking can be actions, e.g. naming a ship, or getting married, actions not easily susceptible to causal reduction.

Dunn's scheme seems to fail because he continues to think of the world of ideas as radically distinct from the 'real' physical world, and of action and society as belonging simply to this causal order. To be sure, Dunn is right to suppose that some information about the circumstances in which the utterance concerned was made will help to identify it as an act of parody, but he is wrong to suppose that we have to think of this 'social' context in causal terms. His attempt to make the study of political ideas more realistic by treating them as elements in the social activity of theorising is undone by his reliance on an extremely reductive model of the social. On top of this, however, there is the question of what counts as identifying an act, and whether we need to know that the utterance concerned was an act of parody at all? To take just one possibility: if we wish to determine whether what the speaker said was true or not, do we really need to know that it was meant as parody? On the relations between philosophy and history, Dunn is equivocal.

His original aim was to show that a 'full' understanding of a political idea required us to be both historians and philosophers: that we must see ideas as elements in the social practice of political argument and also be concerned with the truth of these arguments. Of course, one might wonder why we need a 'full' or 'complete' understanding, and Dunn's response to this is to seek to prioritise causal explanation within the historical account of an idea such that this fully historical account (comprising causal and rational explanations) becomes a precondition of the philosophical appraisal of the ideas concerned.<sup>24</sup> It is the historian who has the techniques at his disposal to correctly identify the point being made by the historical

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<sup>24</sup> There is an ambiguity here: sometimes Dunn speaks as if the 'rational' account covers both 'rational', narrative, history and also the philosophical assessment of ideas. Whichever he has in mind, the aim is clear: that causality is central to history and history is a precondition of philosophy.

figure concerned: 'If the effort to learn from philosophers of the past is a plausible philosophical heuristic, it would be most odd if it can be best carried out *in general* by failing to grasp their actual arguments.'<sup>25</sup> While this purports to show that philosophers must be historians, Dunn nowhere attempts to make the converse case. This is perhaps the fundamental prejudice of the contextualist: that the world of ideas must be made more realistic, that it must be brought down to earth in some way.

This aside, Dunn falters when he comes to the point where he must demonstrate the reliance of philosophers upon the contextualising work of the historian. Every argument is designed to meet a particular set of truth criteria: 'If we are to understand the criteria of truth or falsehood implicit in a complex intellectual architectonic, we have to understand the structures of biographical or social experience which made these criteria self-evident.'<sup>26</sup> These truth criteria are historically variable, specific to a particular 'social experience'. When we evaluate the truth of an argument, we do so not with universally valid criteria, but rather with our own current truth criteria. The consequence of this, according to Dunn, is that any philosophical assessment of a historical argument must fatally distort that argument: 'To abstract an argument from the truth criteria it was designed to meet is to convert it into a different argument.'<sup>27</sup> The consequence of the 'truth criteria argument' is that the philosophical assessment of an argument is *necessarily* unhistorical, i.e. the argument advanced by Plato, or Locke is necessarily *not identical* with that evaluated by philosophers in this century (or any other). With this conclusion, there seems to be little point in telling current philosophers that they must take more care to grasp the 'actual' arguments of dead philosophers, for the moment that they begin to appraise their truth value, these arguments are converted into arguments of another character entirely.

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<sup>25</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.96.

<sup>26</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.96.

<sup>27</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.96.

The problem with this lies with Dunn's assumption that the author fixes the identity of his act. If we are historians we may think of 'it' as an 'act', but if we are philosophers we may rather think of 'it' as a 'proposition': an object of philosophical appraisal. Which is it? The best answer is 'both', depending on one's interests.<sup>28</sup> There is not much to be gained by seeking to work out which of these it 'really' is, for reasons which I shall set out in the next chapter. To be sure, we cannot help but suppose that there is an 'it' which we identify as an 'act' or 'proposition', but there is no neutral, definitive way to say what this is, and so solve the puzzle. Dunn's argument founders then because he assumes that causal explanation would identify the act in question, although as it turns out, this presupposes an identification, rather than supplying one. The underlying problem is that he supposed that there might be a single right answer, which would then bind philosophy to history by determining what it was the historians and philosophers were talking about.

As it is, Dunn concludes with the rather uncomfortable assertion that we are left with two 'pasts', one open and one closed. The former is the past which is of interest to philosophers, one in which 'what we can learn from the past is always what we can succeed in learning; and the educative past can change - as if some disused Mendip lead-working mine were one day to disclose a new and precious sort of uranium.'<sup>29</sup> Here the suggestion seems to be that not only will philosophers identify the object of their concerns in ways which might conflict with the identifications of historians, but also that their identifications are not final, that we may reidentify arguments in ways that we cannot yet foresee. By contrast, the historian works with a

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<sup>28</sup> Strawson distinguishes between 'sentences' and 'statements' in the course of a discussion of what it is to logically appraise an argument. He reserves the term 'statement' for the object of a strictly logical appraisal, i.e. it is a sentence to which we apply the calculus of truth functions. Sentences, by contrast, are collections of words which are not logically appraised. Introduction to Logical Theory. (London: Methuen, 1952). See also Wittgenstein, 'And to say that a proposition is whatever can be true or false amounts to saying: we call something a proposition when in our language we apply the calculus of truth functions to it.' Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, G. E. M. Anscombe (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) §136.

<sup>29</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.98.

closed past in which acts are identified once and for all: 'The problem of interpretation is always the problem of closing the context. What closes the context in actuality is the intention (and, much more broadly, the experiences) of the speaker.'<sup>30</sup> It is not clear why the context of the historian should be any less prone to alterations than that of the philosopher, but setting that aside for the time being, it is interesting that Dunn should close by introducing a new note: the suggestion that a proper, historical, identification of an act, is one which identifies it in terms of the intentions of the actor.

### *Intentions and Speech Acts.*

Subsequently, Quentin Skinner addresses himself to Dunn's problem, i.e. that of determining the precise role of 'context' in the identification of acts.<sup>31</sup> While he agrees with Dunn that the proper identification of an act is one which is made in terms of the actor's intentions, he dissents from Dunn's reliance upon causal explanation and in this way overcomes the reductionist idea that the world of ideas floats somewhere above the world of action, at best simply subject to its causal influence. However, while this is in some respects a more satisfactory use of Austin's theory, he is ultimately no more successful than Dunn in working out an account of what the identity of an act consists in.

Unlike Dunn, Skinner is focused more narrowly upon the correct form that the history of ideas must take, rather than upon the relations between history and philosophy. On the latter question he has not formulated a clear answer at all, and

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<sup>30</sup> Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', p.98.

<sup>31</sup> In 1988 Skinner noted, 'I think it was entirely due to discussions with John Dunn, and to reading the article cited in n.5 above, ['The Identity of the History of Ideas'] that I came to understand the way in which speech-act theory might be relevant to the interpretation of texts. See especially the invocation of J. L. Austin in Dunn's article, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', p.22. in Skinner's 'Reply to My Critics' in *Meaning and Context*, J. Tully (ed.) (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), p.233n.

seems torn between wishing to be 'pluralist' and following his arguments about meaning to their (reductionist) conclusion.<sup>32</sup> His argument falls into three parts. The first is an analysis of what is wrong with existing histories. This is followed by an account of the twin errors he thinks responsible for the flaws observed in writing about the history of ideas: textualism and contextualism.

Skinner presents the history of ideas as embodying four characteristic flaws or 'myths': the pursuit of doctrines; of coherence; a tendency to 'prolepsis'; and finally, a tendency to parochialism. He argues that these organising principles for constructing historical accounts are all misconceived. The myth of doctrines appears in a number of guises. There is a mythology concerning the doctrines present in a text, and a mythology in which doctrines are said to be absent from a text. Of the first there are two chief forms: that found in 'intellectual biographies' and that found in 'histories of ideas'. The mythology of doctrines as it affects intellectual biographies is a matter of 'mistaking some scattered or incidental remarks by one of the classical theorists for his 'doctrine' on one of the themes on which the historian is *set* to expect.'<sup>33</sup> This gives rise to the anachronism of 'crediting a writer with a meaning which he could not have intended to convey, since that meaning was not available to him.' Examples include the suggestion that Marsilius of Padua had a doctrine of the separation of powers, or the controversy as to whether Coke had a doctrine of judicial review. There are also doctrines which 'might in principle' have appeared in a text, but, which the author, 'in fact had no intention to convey.'<sup>34</sup>

In histories of ideas, like those of A. O. Lovejoy, which are concerned to 'trace the morphology of a given doctrine,' ideas are, Skinner argues, hypostatized into

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Ashcraft pronounced Skinner's arguments 'devastating'. Nevertheless, Ashcraft goes on to voice the criticism that Skinner fails to show, 'how... one can proceed from 'history' or 'philosophy' to the activity of theorising about political life as one experiences it in the present.' Ashcraft, 'On the problem of methodology and the nature of political theory,' Political Theory 3 (1975), pp.5-25. p.22.

<sup>33</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.36.

<sup>34</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.33.

entities and these in turn are discussed as if they were organisms. This gives rise to the practice of discovering 'anticipations' of subsequent authors in a particular writer's work and worries about whether an idea has 'really emerged' in the work of a particular author. These 'absurdities', Skinner claims, stem from the historians' failure to recognise 'that ideas presuppose agents.'<sup>35</sup>

The second problem identified by Skinner is the problem of coherence. Historians make the mistake of supplying the coherence which an author's work may lack. This produces the impression that an author's work is a 'closed system', when the work in question actually falls short of this, or may never have been meant to attain this level of coherence.<sup>36</sup> This results in the practice of discounting an author's own 'statements of intention', or the discounting of books which prevent a particular system from being established. Another abuse promoted by the search for coherence is manifested in the unwillingness of interpreters to accept that an apparent contradiction may very well be just that: a contradiction. Ultimately, practising textual exegesis on the basis of this mythology of 'coherence' produces 'not a history of ideas at all, but of abstractions: a history of thoughts which no one actually succeeded in thinking, at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained.'<sup>37</sup> This appears to be a restatement of Skinner's misgivings about the determination of historians to find coherent 'doctrines' in a text. In each case, the problem, as Skinner sees, it is the historians' tendency to discount the author's actual intentions.

The third problem is that of 'prolepsis', which is defined as: 'the conflation of the necessary asymmetry between the significance an observer may justifiably claim to find in a given statement or other action, and the meaning of that action itself.'<sup>38</sup> Examples of this include the suggestions that Plato and Rousseau were justifying

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<sup>35</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.35.

<sup>36</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.39.

<sup>37</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.40.

<sup>38</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.44.

totalitarianism, or that Locke was a 'liberal' theorist. The 'necessary asymmetry' is between the 'significance' of a theorist's work for us and 'its meaning for the agent himself.'<sup>39</sup> Thus Locke may reasonably be considered significant as the founder of liberalism but this should not be confused with statements to the effect that Locke was himself a 'liberal', or that he could possibly have 'intended to contribute' to the liberal 'school of philosophy'.<sup>40</sup> It is not clear why Skinner thinks of this as a 'necessary asymmetry', but it is clear that problems will arise if historians do not consider the possibility that the significance of a text for a later age may not coincide with the meaning its author intended it to have.

The problem of 'parochialism' presents itself when a historian misdescribes the 'sense and the intended reference of a given work.'<sup>41</sup> This problem arises in any study involving, 'an alien culture or an unfamiliar conceptual scheme.' This misidentification may give rise to a mistaken attribution of influence by a historian who fails to see who an author intended to refer to, supplying instead a referent of his own. The suggestion that Locke was 'really' referring to Hobbes is one example of this, as is the suggestion that Hobbes was influenced by Machiavelli.

Skinner concludes his account of these problems with two more general points concerning the writing of intellectual history, one 'empirical', and the other 'logical'. The logical 'consideration' is that, 'no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done.'<sup>42</sup> The 'agent' is said to have 'special authority... over his intentions,' and this rules out the possibility of accounts of an agent's actions in which criteria are employed by the historian which were 'not available' to the agent himself.

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<sup>39</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.44.

<sup>40</sup> See discussion below of Skinner's theory of meaning. Note that Skinner insists that we cannot identify Locke as a liberal, even though we may say that this is the 'significance' of his work.

<sup>41</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.45.

<sup>42</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.48.

Skinner argues, 'it cannot (logically) be a correct appraisal of any agent's action to say that he failed to do something unless it is first clear that he did have, and even could have had, the intention to try to perform that action.'<sup>43</sup> This is the linchpin of Skinner's argument, for his objections to the history of ideas assume that the history of ideas must be concerned with recovering the true identity of historical acts, where this is identified with their author's intentions.

The empirical consideration is a simple one, drawn from Dunn, i.e. that thinking is an 'effortful activity'. Historians should avoid pressing these ideas into the form of coherent doctrines.<sup>44</sup> However, while Skinner has clearly provided a useful warning about the insidious problem of anachronism, we might wonder if he has not simply *assumed* that the correct account of an idea or argument is one which treats it in terms of its author's intentions?

Having detailed the shortcomings of the history of ideas, Skinner goes on to argue that there are deep seated causes for these failures: the acceptance by historians of one or other of two orthodoxies: textualism and contextualism. The history of ideas cannot simply be reformed by taking more care, but only by finding the right way to organise our contextualisations, which, in Skinner's view, entails the clarification of just what the objects of contextualisation must be: the intended acts of individual authors. Both 'textualists' and 'contextualists' get this wrong as Skinner sees it. Taking his critique of textualism first, we see that under this heading he groups both 'intellectual biographies' and histories of ideas. Because they focus on the 'text itself' rather than upon its context and its author's intentions, these approaches are:

...incapable in principle of considering or even recognising some of the most crucial problems which must arise in any attempt to

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<sup>43</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.48.

<sup>44</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.49.



understand the relations between what a given writer may have said, and what he may be said to have meant by saying what he said.<sup>45</sup>

Textualism in the writing of intellectual biographies will prevent writers from discovering whether or not the meaning of the words contained in the text have altered over time and consequently whether or not they meant the same for the author and his contemporaries on one hand, and for the modern reader on the other. Misunderstandings may also arise if the author has used some 'oblique strategy' e.g. irony in a text. The history of ideas, however, simply fails to recognise that ideas are not proper objects of historical investigation at all.

There is, he claims, 'an underlying conceptual confusion in any attempt to focus on an idea itself as an appropriate unit of historical investigation.'<sup>46</sup> It is argued that words do not have 'essential' meanings. Citing Wittgenstein, Skinner points out that words derive their meanings from the way in which they are used. Even within a given historical era, a word may be used in more than one way. To illustrate this he cites the example of Bacon remarking that nobility adds majesty to a monarch. First of all, the word 'nobility' may refer to moral virtue, or secondly to membership of a social class. Bacon may be making a point about virtue, or about membership of a social class. In addition, Skinner notes, there was a Renaissance tradition of using the term in a 'studied' way, i.e. to indicate the possibility that there may arise a discrepancy between these two uses. A historian of ideas must necessarily go astray because he simply concentrates upon the 'forms of words involved' and ignores the possibility that these words may be used with particular intentions in mind.

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<sup>45</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.50.

<sup>46</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.54.

The basic mistake,

... may be most conveniently characterised, by adopting an extension of the basic distinction between meaning and use, as the result of a failure to distinguish between the occurrence of the words (phrases or *sentences*) which denote the given idea, and the *use* of the relevant sentence by a particular agent on a particular occasion with a particular intention (*his* intention) to make a particular *statement*.<sup>47</sup>

Admittedly, histories of ideas are not devoid of authors, but the point that Skinner insists upon is that these characters appear simply because a sentence of interest to the historian occurred in their work: they are appendages to their own utterances. Consequently, we cannot learn what role an idea may have had within the work of a particular author or in the culture at large.

There are two sorts of problem here: (1) whether it is true that the history of ideas is textualist? (2) whether Skinner's author-centred account of meaning is sound? Are intellectual biographies and histories of ideas textualist in that they focus solely on the content of individual texts? This appears to be a feature of certain styles of literary criticism rather than of the history of ideas. This textualism, associated with the practice of 'close reading', in which an individual work was studied in isolation from other texts, or its 'context', was a central tenet of what is called 'The New Criticism', an approach to literary criticism inspired by T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, which flourished from the mid 1930s into the late 1950s. Skinner draws his definition of textualism from the work of W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, critics noted for their attack on the idea of authorial intentionality.<sup>48</sup> The New Critics were explicitly unhistorical and their

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<sup>47</sup> Note that this reverses Strawson's distinction between statements as objects of logical appraisal and the sentences used to make them. Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.55.

<sup>48</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley, 'The intentional fallacy,' in W. K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon, (University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

'close reading' of single texts, usually poems, may well be liable to Skinner's charges. What he does not establish is that this particular approach was popular amongst historians of ideas. Given the explicitly anti-historical position of the New Critics, this seems improbable.

Unlike the explicitly textualist New Critics, intellectual biographers associate a variety of texts, e.g. books, manuscripts, letters and other personal documents, around the figure of an author, and place this figure in a variety of personal, social and political contexts. This looks like the sort of enterprise which would meet Skinner's criteria for a proper history. Similarly, histories of ideas necessarily group texts by a variety of authors, rather than taking an individual text in isolation, so once again it is hard to see how they might be thought of as 'textualist' in the requisite sense. A. O. Lovejoy is repeatedly censured by Skinner, but he explicitly criticised the idea that a work of art should be considered as a 'self contained kind of thing', calling it a 'psychological absurdity'.<sup>49</sup> His 'unit ideas' are in fact complexes, and in the case of the Great Chain of Being, this complex comprises 'plenitude', 'continuity' and 'linear gradation'. The history of the Great Chain of Being is the history of the way different authors combined these ideas, not only with each other but also with other ideas.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that Skinner thinks that 'textualism' must fail because to confine one's investigations to a single text will most likely prevent one from correctly identifying the arguments contained in it. These derive their identity from their use by particular authors, in particular contexts, with particular intentions. It is the author's intentions which constitute the identity of the arguments concerned, arguments which will be misidentified if we do not concern ourselves with these intentions.

Before addressing the difficulties with Skinner's theory of meaning, let us see how he employs it against 'contextualism'. By this he understands the attempt to treat context as a causal determinant of action, and he groups together a variety of

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<sup>49</sup>A. O. Lovejoy, 'Reflections on the history of ideas,' Journal of the History of Ideas 1 (1940), pp.3-23, p.14.

<sup>50</sup> Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being, (1936) (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p.22.

reductionist contextualisms, e.g. Marxism, and behaviourism, under this heading. Skinner addresses himself directly to Ayer's argument that motives form the bridge between acts and their context insofar as they are open to causal explanation. Ayer had argued that motives could be regarded as causes insofar as they were contingently related and antecedent to the action to be explained.<sup>51</sup> Skinner grants this point, but argues that it is possible to conceive of an agent's intentions in a manner which clearly distinguishes them from motives, and which separates them from causal explanation. It is possible, he points out, to distinguish between having an intention 'to' perform an action, and an intention 'in' performing an action. To have an intention 'to' do something is much like having a motive, i.e. it is antecedent to the action concerned, and is contingently related to it insofar as one might have an intention to do something, and yet never do it. On the other hand, to say of someone that they had a particular intention 'in' performing a given action is to suggest that the action and intention are 'logically connected,' such that there can be no intention 'in' without an action. This sort of intention cannot be equated with a causal condition, Skinner concludes, as it is not antecedent to that which it is supposed to cause. Furthermore, to inquire about an agent's intentions in performing an action is, according to Skinner, equivalent to inquiring about the 'point' of that action. A necessary condition of understanding an action is to grasp its point, where according to Skinner, the point of an action is to be identified with the intentions of the agent in performing it:

Every statement made or other action performed must presuppose an intention to have done it - call it a cause if you like - but also an intention in doing it, which cannot be a cause, but which must be grasped if the action itself is to be correctly characterised and so understood.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', pp.59-60.

<sup>52</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.61.

Skinner is not content with arguing that causal treatments of context fail to grasp the point of the utterances they contextualise. He goes on to elaborate his understanding of how the point of an utterance is constituted, in terms of a distinction between the 'meaning' and 'force' of an utterance. This argument is designed to show that even if we identify the meaning of an utterance we cannot be said to have understood it until we have correctly identified its force. This will close off the possibility that historians may simply disavow any interest in what an author intended by what he said, and instead focus on the significance of the text for contemporary, or subsequent audiences. By identifying the 'point' with the 'intended point' of an utterance, Skinner hopes to show that this option is not viable.

Skinner takes the Machiavellian dictum: 'a prince must learn how not to be virtuous', and suggests that we take its sense and reference to be clear. We might even allow that this clarity may have been achieved by 'a study of the entire social context of the utterance' which may reveal that virtue typically tended to the ruination of princes. He then suggests that we consider 'two alternative truths' about the statement concerned: (a) that such cynical advice was frequently offered at this time, or (b) that such advice had almost never been offered in public before. If one takes the first to be true, the 'intended force of the utterance itself in the mind of the agent who uttered it can only have been to endorse or emphasise an accepted moral attitude.' If the second is taken to be true, then the 'intended force' is rather that of 'rejecting or repudiating an established moral commonplace.'

Obviously one's understanding of Machiavelli's aims depends upon which of the 'alternative truths' one chooses to accept. It is Skinner's contention that neither by paying attention to the meaning of the initial statement nor by focusing on its social context can one discover whether Machiavelli was attempting to subvert or sustain the moral assumptions of his era. Only by asking the additional question about the 'intended force' of the statement can one achieve an understanding of that statement.

What are the implications of this account of meaning? Dunn had hoped that if he could show that a study of historical context could identify an argument then he would have shown why philosophers must be historians, i.e. contextualists. Ultimately he was unable to make this argument work as it appeared that historians and philosophers were simply interested in different things and, therefore identified the object of their interests differently. Skinner's chief ambition is ostensibly more limited: an attempt to provide a conceptual grounding for a particular way of writing histories of ideas. A consequence of this is that traditional styles of narrative: intellectual biographies, histories of ideas, etc. are exposed as misconceived. The appropriate form of account is one which centres on the intentions of historical authors and Skinner's version of speech act theory rules out the possibility that we might identify a given act in ways which the author had not intended. If Locke did not think of his work as an episode in the history of liberalism, then we cannot legitimately characterise it as such.

This is a big claim with wide and uncomfortable implications. Not only does this rule out a host of narrative forms within the history of ideas, it also has implications for the sorts of things philosophers and others might want to say about a particular argument: they too will be constrained in their treatment of it. Skinner does not shy away from this conclusion but argues that the philosophical interest in historical ideas must be confined to the issues which arise out of the business of interpretation, i.e. the history of ideas may furnish examples for the philosophy of action. The content of historical arguments is placed firmly out of bounds: there are no 'perennial problems' or 'universal truths' from which we might hope to learn, there are only statements which are 'inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend'.<sup>53</sup> The claim is that it is a mistake to try to abstract and generalise as we do when we suggest

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<sup>53</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.65.

that both Plato and Rousseau are concerned with the problem of determining what legitimises political authority. What they are 'really' doing is nothing of the sort, it is claimed, and to abstract is thus to misidentify, to turn the argument concerned into something it is not.<sup>54</sup> Obviously a claim like this extends beyond the academic confines of history or philosophy departments to our interactions with other people *tout court* and has the drastic consequences for what we may think about what others are doing and saying, such that individual actors exclusively determine what may legitimately be said about their activities. Indeed, in attacking abstraction and generalisation, Skinner appears to attack conceptualisation *per se*, and not only an understanding of ideas as Platonic objects of some sort. If we are not permitted to describe utterances in ways which pick out similarities in the way they are used, abstracting from the ways in which they differ and from non-relevant similarities, then it is hard to see how we could ever say that two different utterances ever express the same idea.

Skinner's use of Austin's speech act theory to defend this claim is unsuccessful. In 'Meaning and Understanding' the claim is that while literal meaning lies outside the control of the author, it is the author who determines the illocutionary force, i.e. the point, of the utterance concerned. This strategy of distinguishing between aspects of meaning which are public and those which are private, i.e. determined solely by the individual, has some odd consequences. First of all, the attempt to explain the shortcomings of 'textualist' and contextualist histories as the result of a concentration upon literal meaning as opposed to force is simply implausible. It is one thing to suggest that an historian's analysis of the concept of meaning is not especially

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<sup>54</sup> 'Any statement, as I have sought to show, is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend. The vital implication here is not merely that the classic texts cannot be concerned with our questions and answers, but only with their own. There is also the further implication that - to revive Collingwood's way of putting it - there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners.' 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.65. Skinner then suggests that we can describe problems in ways sufficiently abstract as to make them appear the same, but that we cannot do this with the answers of different authors. Obviously the device of abstraction applies as well to one as the other. Whether it is always helpful to abstract in order to generalise is another matter, and the answer, I suggest, depends on the nature of the problem at hand. Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.66.

sophisticated, and that, consequently, she does not distinguish between sentence meaning and illocutionary force, but quite another thing to suggest that because of this she is incapable of grasping this aspect of meaning altogether.<sup>55</sup> This would seem to attribute to historians of ideas a bizarre literal-mindedness, simply because they are not philosophers of language. The mistake Skinner makes here is to suppose that the lack of a theoretical account of a distinction is equivalent to the lack of a practical grasp of it.<sup>56</sup> If this were so, then historians would not simply be prone to misidentifying examples of irony, but rather would be unable to grasp the concept of irony at all. Of course, Skinner requires a claim of this sort in order to show that existing studies in the history of ideas do not simply go wrong, but that they *necessarily* go wrong. To suggest that they *sometimes* fail to identify the intended force of historical authors' utterances would not suffice to justify the wholesale reformation of the history of ideas which Skinner proposes.

This is not the only problem with the way Skinner draws the distinction between meaning and use. Besides giving it undue weight in his analysis of the reasons why histories of ideas are so unhistorical, there is a problem with the way he conceives of this distinction. Skinner appears to believe that the basis of the distinction is that while literal meaning is established by public conventions, the use, or force, of the utterance is determined solely by the intentions of the speaker. The speaker must rely on the conventions governing meaning in order to be able to convey his point, but it is his intentions alone that invest these conventions with a force or point. This is crucial

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<sup>55</sup> As noted above, this distinction is itself not especially firm, and ultimately collapses into the difference between different types of speech act, rather than between speech acts and other sorts of utterances.

<sup>56</sup> Felix Raab's study of the reception of Machiavelli is just one of the studies to which Skinner attributes this error. However, the organising principle of Raab's study is that Machiavelli not only meant different things to different readers, but also that they pressed this understanding of him into service as their ideological needs required. See *The English Face of Machiavelli*, (London: Routledge, 1965). Skinner rejects all reception oriented studies although if these are treated as studies of what x or y meant by their respective uses of Machiavelli's *Prince*, or any other text, as opposed to 'what Machiavelli meant by what he said', then it is hard to see how Skinner could reject them. Provided *some* authors intentions are the focus of study, then even reception studies would seem to meet Skinner's criteria.



to Skinner's attempt to draw specific conclusions about the correct form which the history of ideas must adopt from a theory of meaning. If we can legitimately identify the act a speaker has performed in ways which that speaker did not foresee, then we should not be constrained to organise our narratives around the *intended* force of utterances.

Skinner's argument founders on the objection that a speaker's intention cannot simply fix the force of his utterances in the way that Skinner requires, as there are numerous instances in which the force of an act may be 'misidentified', i.e. where we might say that utterances carry forces other than those intended by the speaker. The very fact that historians of ideas may have mistaken what historical authors meant by what they said is enough to establish this. If Skinner failed to appreciate that utterances may carry unintended as well as intended forces, then this would explain why he sought to explain the shortcomings of the historians in terms of a failure to notice the dimension of force rather than in terms of a misattribution of it.

When critics objected that the 'force of an utterance is as much governed by public conventions as is the literal meaning of the words contained in it', Skinner responds by allowing that this may be so, but nonetheless the identity of the *act*, as opposed to its *force* is fixed exclusively by the speaker.<sup>57</sup> His critics:

...have failed to recognise what I take to be the distinction between illocutionary forces and illocutionary acts. The former term points to a resource of language; the latter to the capacity of agents to exploit it in communication. The illocutionary acts we perform are identified, like all voluntary acts, by our intentions; but the illocutionary forces carried by our utterances are mainly determined by their meaning and context. It is for these reasons that it can readily happen that, in performing an illocutionary act, my utterance at the same time carry, though without

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<sup>57</sup> Keith Graham points to the problem of unintentional action in 'How do illocutionary descriptions explain?' *Ratio* 22 (1981), pp.124-35, reprinted in *Meaning and Context*. Tully (ed.), pp.147-55.

my intending it, a much wider range of illocutionary force (For example, although I may intend only to warn you, my utterance may at the same time have the force of informing you of something.). But this is only to say that, due to the richness of our language, many, perhaps most of my utterances will carry some element of unintended illocutionary force. It is not in the least to point to a class of unintended illocutionary acts.<sup>58</sup>

This has the consequence that where an utterance carries an unintended force, e.g. if someone were to intend to make a joke but instead caused offence to his audience, then we could not legitimately say that the utterance was an insult, we should have to say that it was a joke. The audience may have identified the force of the utterance as that of an insult, but they could not say that the utterance itself was an insult. They have been insulted, but the speaker cannot be said to have insulted them. To be sure, when we come to apportion blame for the insult the fact that the author did not intend to insult anyone will matter, but it will not convert his utterance into a joke. The idea that illocutionary acts are a special class of act which cannot be performed unintentionally is clearly an odd one and all the more so as Skinner acknowledges that utterances may carry unintended forces. He is driven to this conclusion by his determination to hold on to the idea that it is the author alone who determines the identity of his action. Ultimately, we cannot accept the version of speech act theory upon which Skinner proposes to rest his author-centred history of ideas. And this throws his attempt to constrain our ability to contextualise in a variety of ways, into question.

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<sup>58</sup> Skinner, 'Reply', pp.265-6.

### *Levels of Description*

Skinner's argument, had it been successful, would have eliminated a variety of non-author-centred styles of history: the history of ideas, of problematics, of ideologies, or of traditions. None of these are deemed valid objects of inquiry, for all entail connecting authors' actions under larger schemes not intended by their authors, establishing equivalences and contrasts equally distant from the intentions of those authors. Indeed, the construction of historical narratives *per se*, is ruled out by Skinner's view insofar as the construction of a narrative involves devices he regards as misconceived. If Skinner's view had been shown to be correct, this would have proven a serious challenge to Marxist and Foucauldian styles of social criticism, as both of these connect a variety of objects, texts, ideas, traditions, images, films, material objects, etc. in systematic ways as elements of a larger ideological or discursive formation. These interpretative projects offer descriptive possibilities which can prove useful to the critical task of offering others reasons for transforming their beliefs. A comparison of Skinner's proposals for reforming the history of ideas with Foucault's criticism of this discipline indicates how we might arrive at a view of contextualisation which can combine sensitivity to particularity without sacrificing an account of the systematic relations between the objects of contextualisation. The key to this lies in the distinction between levels of description.

Foucault elaborates his idea of 'discourse' and that of an 'archaeology' of discursive formations around the same time as Skinner launches his attack on the history of ideas and there are significant similarities between their analyses of the excessively abstract character of historical writing.<sup>59</sup> Foucault contrasts 'total' history with what he calls 'general' history, which he thinks is beginning to displace the

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<sup>59</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, A.M. Sheridan Smith (trans.) (London: Pantheon, 1972). See for example their concern about the historians' eagerness to resolve apparent contradictions in the works they study. Foucault says that one of the aims of archaeology is 'to maintain discourse in all its many regularities; and consequently to suppress the theme of a contradiction uniformly lost and rediscovered, resolved and forever rising again, in the undifferentiated element of the Logos.' Foucault, *Archaeology*, p.156.

former.<sup>60</sup> This new sensibility is one which will question the teleologies and totalisations of its predecessor and in its place will elaborate a plurality of histories, not isolated from one another but connected in a host of ways. Foucault criticises the old models which privilege continuity over discontinuity and specificity and which elide the differences between statements in order to press them into the preferred style of narrative. Under the heading of 'the unities of discourse', Foucault details the devices used to group statements in total histories. These include: 'tradition', 'influence', 'development and evolution', 'spirit', the 'book' and the 'oeuvre' and the idea of fixed genres like science, history, politics, and literature.<sup>61</sup> These devices are simply taken for granted, Foucault observes, and if we are to make discontinuities and transformations visible then we must seek to avoid them as they serve to produce histories which centre primarily upon origins and continuities. Foucault's suggestion is that we should think instead in terms of a plurality of discursive formations, distinct but often interrelated and constituted by rules governing the ordering of statements within them.<sup>62</sup> 'Discourse' is designed to be a relatively inclusive device for associating and differentiating statements, insofar as it covers a range of statements, their objects, concepts, strategies and 'enunciative' sites as well as the rules which make the production of statements possible.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> 'A total description draws all phenomena around a single centre - a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world view, an overall shape; a general history, on the contrary, would deploy the space of a dispersion.' Foucault, *Archaeology*, p.10.

<sup>61</sup> Foucault, *Archaeology*, pp.21-2.

<sup>62</sup> Foucault's 'statements' are not positively defined: he is content to say that the statement is 'not the same kind of unit as the sentence, the proposition, or the speech act'. By this he appears to mean that we are free to take any of these as statements as the context demands, without simply identifying the statement with any one. Foucault, *Archaeology*, p.86.

<sup>63</sup> The idea of the 'enunciative' element covers who is speaking, in what context and in what capacity, i.e. what Foucault thinks of as the various positions that a subject of discourse may occupy. In this way speakers/writers are included under the category of 'discourse' without the implication that they constitute its origin. The enunciative function, he says, provides a temporal and spatial ordering of statements to complement their logical or 'systematic' ordering. The enunciative function concerns the fact that statements were made by particular persons at a particular time and place. Foucault, *Archaeology*, p.173.

The criticism of the traditional unities of discourse has much in common with Skinner's strictures on the 'myths' produced by the traditional history of ideas. Both object to narratives focused on influences, on the search for 'anticipations' and, generally to the way that the specificity of the past is eroded by contemporary historians. There are, nonetheless, great differences between the two, notably in their attitude to the figure of the author, for while Skinner argues that we lose the identity of an utterance when we fail to identify it with its author's intentions in uttering it, Foucault famously regards 'the author' as yet another device which serves to produce origins and continuities.<sup>64</sup>

Foucault historicises the idea of authorship, identifying four features of the idea of the author.<sup>65</sup> Firstly, that the author establishes a relation between a collection of writings, i.e. that writings are grouped as the works of a single author, their common point of origin. Secondly, he notes the variability of our ideas of authorship. While nothing seems more obvious than that texts have authors, Foucault notes that folk-tales characteristically do not, and that this is in fact a mark of their authenticity. He suggests too that Enlightenment served to alter the role of the author insofar as the arguments of scientific texts were supposed to speak for themselves, as it were, rather than to rely upon the names of their authors as a guarantee of their worth. Thirdly, he notes the existence of an apparatus for identifying the marks of authorship, citing by way of example, the employment of tests like St. Jerome's four criteria of authenticity in Biblical criticism.<sup>66</sup> The attribution of texts to authors may be a *complex* business,

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<sup>64</sup> '...the subject of the statement should not be regarded as identical with the author of the formulation - either in substance, or in function. He is not in fact the cause, origin, or starting-point of the phenomenon of the written or spoken articulation of a sentence... If a proposition, a sentence, a group of signs can be called 'statement', it is not therefore because, one day, someone happened to speak then or put them into some concrete form of writing; it is because the position of the subject can be assigned.' Foucault, *Archaeology*, p.95.

<sup>65</sup> Foucault, 'What is an author?' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, D.F. Bouchard (ed.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp.113-38.

<sup>66</sup> 'According to St. Jerome there are four criteria: the texts that must be eliminated from a list of works attributed to a single author are those inferior to the others (thus the author is defined as a standard level of quality); those whose ideas conflict with the doctrine expressed in the others (here the author is defined as a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence); those written in a

involving the construction of an author out of the text itself. Finally, Foucault notes that the author, rather than representing the simple point of origin of a work, is not synonymous with the various 'subject positions' which are contained within it, i.e. that the texts themselves may unfold from a narrator, who is not necessarily identical with the author, or contain narratives told in the third person rather than the first.

In drawing attention to these details about the idea of the 'author', Foucault says he does not aim to abolish the idea, but only to problematise it. Having said that, it would be wrong to suppose that this problematisation is wholly innocent. In seeking to dislodge the category of 'author' from its central position in our interpretative repertoire, Foucault is articulating a deeper opposition to certain ideas of subjectivity *per se*, the idea, in particular, that the subject is a *centre* of choice and agency, a creator of meaning. He proposes that,

We should suspend the typical questions: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask, under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse.<sup>67</sup>

Foucault goes on to conjecture that if, having shown that the category of the author is contingent and variable in its use, then it might be possible to conceive of

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different style and containing words and phrases not ordinarily found in the other works (the author is seen as a stylistic uniformity); and those referring to events or historical figures subsequent to the death of the author (the author is thus a definite historical figure in which a series of events converge).' Foucault, 'What is an author?', p.128.

<sup>67</sup> Foucault, 'What is an author?', p.137-8.

circumstances in which we would no longer feel compelled to trace discourse back to its anchor, its origin, in an author. This would liberate us, he claims, from 'tiresome' questions about the authenticity of a work and whether or not its author had fully revealed himself in the work.

Foucault is eager to present us with an alternative to the devices which produce histories of continuities rather than of discontinuities, but these devices are not simply rejected as 'misconceived'. While he introduces the idea of discourse as part of a project of setting out a 'pure description of discursive events', it becomes clear that these traditional devices are not rejected because they do not reflect 'how things are', but because if one is primarily interested in discontinuities they are not useful.<sup>68</sup> His argument is essentially a pragmatic one in which the idea of discourse is thought of in terms of the choice of a 'level of description' which is appropriate to a particular interest in the matter at hand.<sup>69</sup> In his account, 'statements' are treated as elements of a discourse, in which they are systematically related to one another, but this is not to deny that they may also be thought of as elements of particular speech acts. On this pluralist view we do not have to choose between one way of identifying acts and another, but only to specify the level of description at which we are associating them. We could allow that speakers intend their utterances to be taken in a particular way without limiting ourselves to determining what this is, or organising our account of that utterance around this narrative principle. The identity of the act concerned cannot be specified independently of our interest in it, on this view, while Skinner on the other hand assumes that the speaker's intentions fix its identity in such a way as to limit what we might say about the act in question.

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<sup>68</sup> Foucault objects to the fact that we take devices like the book or the oeuvre for granted, but cautions that they 'must not be rejected definitively of course...' *Archaeology*, p.25. The idea of discourse is to be conceived as a 'descriptive possibility' (p.108) The organisation of statements in a discourse, 'does not claim to be a total, exhaustive description of 'language' (*langage*), or of 'what was said'. In the whole density implied by verbal performances, it is situated at a particular level that must be distinguished from the others, characterised in relation to them and abstract.' (p.108)

<sup>69</sup> This feature of Foucault's argument is not often remarked upon, but see Ian Hacking, 'The archaeology of Foucault,' in D. C. Hoy (ed.), *Foucault: a critical reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.27-40.

This view holds out the prospect of a pragmatic, pluralist, approach to questions of context and to the question of the identity of the objects of one's inquiries. It suggests that what is at issue is not so much the contrast between abstraction and context, a contrast in which context is thought to reveal the world as it is with real men living and breathing within it, as it were, but rather the problem of determining the level of description required by one's interests. The idea of 'context', while it is commonly taken to represent a particular level of 'thick' socio-historical description, as opposed to the thinness of abstraction and generalisation, might be better thought of as potentially encompassing both of these, as representing the idea of a plurality of potential descriptions *per se*.

Arguably, Skinner has, as time has gone on, felt the pull of this pluralism, although he has drawn back from affirming it. When we look at his historical work we find that perhaps a concern to understand what an author meant by his utterance does not necessarily constrain the way we can incorporate this understanding into a particular narrative, and it might be said that Skinner has accordingly produced both an intellectual biography and the history of an idea, that of the state.<sup>70</sup> This suggests not that one cannot write a history which is concerned primarily with an author's intentions but rather than one can do so without limiting oneself to identifying their arguments solely as they intended.

In his explicit statements on these issues, Skinner appears to have considerably trimmed his claims, suggesting that his strictures really presumed an interest in writing a particular sort of history, and that they were not meant to apply right across the board:

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<sup>70</sup> Skinner claims that The Foundations of Modern Political Thought is a history of ideologies, rather than the history of an idea (p.xiii), but is the history of an ideology equivalent to the 'conceptually proper' history of statements? For the claim that the Foundations is the history of the idea of the 'state' see Boucher, 'On Shklar and Franklin's reviews of Skinner,' Political Theory 8 (1980), pp.403-6. Boucher details a variety of deviation into mythology. Skinner appears to speak about "perennial questions" in Vol.1 p.48, 200, 63, and in Vol.2 p.239. 'influence' appears in Vol.1 p.34, 91, 213 and Vol.2 p.19; also Vol.1 p.149, 242 and Vol.2 p.22, 24, 26, 214, 337. 'Anticipations' appear in the form of 'hints' in Vol.2 p.349, 349-54, 156, 165, 227, 239, 338. 'Evolutionary' understandings appear in Vol.1 p.ix, 65, and Vol.2 p.23, 65, 81, 89. Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).



...it can hardly be a relevant criticism to observe that we may approach a text with many other questions in mind besides the one I have singled out. I do not *arbitrarily* exclude these questions: I exclude them on the grounds that they are unconnected with - and must not be confused with - the hermeneutic enterprise in which I am alone interested.<sup>71</sup>

Skinner also suggests that there are circumstances in which it would be 'legitimate to go beyond, even if not to contest, the stock descriptions available to people we are studying', for example, to 'comment upon the place of these beliefs within some larger historical pattern or narrative' or to explain how the people concerned came to hold them.<sup>72</sup> This would appear to let the traditional history of ideas back in again, provided that intentions themselves are not misattributed. However, Skinner cannot let go of the central idea that the author exclusively determines the identity of his action. It is in this same afterword that Skinner defends the idea that authors cannot unintentionally perform illocutionary acts and asserts that

...where a historian is trying to identify beliefs - as opposed to explaining or commenting on them - it will generally be fatal to revise the terms in which they are expressed [...] To revise these terms will in consequence be to talk about a different set of beliefs.<sup>73</sup>

Of course, if this is true, then it is hard to see how Skinner can exempt 'explaining' or 'commenting' from these strictures.

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<sup>71</sup> Skinner, 'Reply', p.232.

<sup>72</sup> Skinner, 'Reply', p.254.

<sup>73</sup> Skinner, 'Reply', p.255.

Having said that, there is some movement on the substantial ethical conclusions which Skinner draws from his contextualism. Initially, this amounts to little more than a bald assertion that the concerns of the past are not the same as those of the present, and that the lesson we should draw from this is that our concerns are not perhaps as universal as we might have supposed. In trying to learn from the past, we inevitably erase this difference, and so the attempt to do so must be regarded as misconceived. What the historical contextualisation of ideas underlines is 'the essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political commitments'.<sup>74</sup> Contextualisation recalls us to the fact of pluralism, although it is a pluralism which is peculiarly uninteresting insofar as we can never be said to learn from those whose beliefs and commitments differ from ours. Subsequently however, Skinner not only reaffirms the idea that contextualisation teaches us the lesson of pluralism, but he also wishes to say that we can learn from those in different contexts, with different perspectives. It is wrong, he argues, to suppose that a recognition that we act in particular contexts entails that we adopt a relativistic stance towards our own beliefs or those of others, still less a moral parochialism.<sup>75</sup>

Skinner has put his finger on the central problem of context here, although it cannot be said that he indicates how it might be solved. If his account of contextualisation is right, i.e. that one interprets in order to restore the proper identity of historical acts, the identity established by their author's intentions, and if alternative identifications are deemed illegitimate, then the sort of Millian attitude to the plurality of belief which Skinner has come to favour must be regarded as misconceived.<sup>76</sup> We

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<sup>74</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.67.

<sup>75</sup> 'A resurgent conservatism tells us that this is merely another way of proclaiming the relativity of all values, and thus of leaving us bereft of any values at all. This seems to me as far as possible from the truth. The kind of inquiries I am describing offer us an additional means of reflecting on what we believe, and thus of strengthening our present beliefs by way of testing them against alternative possibilities, or else of improving them if we come to recognise that the alternatives are both possible and desirable. As I have already stressed, a willingness to engage in this kind of reflection seems to me a distinguishing feature of all rational agents. To denounce such studies is not a defence of reason but an assault on the open society.' Skinner, 'Reply', p.286.

<sup>76</sup> Skinner's commitment to the idea of historical study pursued in strict isolation from moral/practical considerations bears more than a passing resemblance to Michael Oakeshott's strictures on the

will be prevented from redescribing the problems of others in terms which may reveal the extent to which they may be proposing answers to our own problems. What we need is a better understanding of what is involved in contextualising, an understanding which does justice to the plurality of people's beliefs, but which avoids the pitfall of a contextual solipsism. This account, on my view, will necessarily have a pluralist form in the manner sketched above, a form which will rest on the presupposition of the legitimacy of a variety of 'levels of description' and which will neither privilege socio-historical particularity nor generalising abstraction.

The next Chapter will concentrate on setting out a pluralist, pragmatic account of context and interpretation, one which does not set *a priori* limits to contextualisation, but instead allows that the appropriateness of a conceptual scheme will depend on the questions posed by the interpreter. These may focus on the intentions of historical authors, or they may focus on 'discourses', 'traditions', 'ideologies', as appropriate. This account of 'pragmatic contextualisation' will serve as the basis for an interpretative social criticism, one which will be sensitive to social and historical context but which also avoids a reductionist, relativist understanding of these contexts. Having shown that interpretation can function as social criticism and need not be restricted to scholarly purposes, subsequent Chapters will flesh out this model of context and of social criticism through a series of examinations of alternative models of context and social criticism. In particular, Chapters Three and Four will return to the wider ethical implications of the view of context which governs Skinner's work, one which apparently assumes that communication and deliberation between persons situated in different contexts is either impossible, or pointless.

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relations between history and 'practice'. See Oakeshott, *On History*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) and 'The activity of being a historian,' in *Rationalism and Politics*, (1962) (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp.151-83. Curiously, this shared commitment to a categorical division between historical and normative problems is not remarked upon by contemporary Oakeshottians such as Kenneth Minogue, who prefers instead to criticise the appearance of 'method' in Skinner's history. See Minogue, 'Method in intellectual history: Quentin Skinner's Foundations,' in *Meaning and Context*, pp.176-93. It will be argued below that there is no reason to suppose that we cannot combine both normative and historical concerns.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PRAGMATIC CONTEXTUALISATION

We cannot identify objects of interpretation without some reference to our interests. The appeal to context can, in some hands, obscure the fact that 'context' is inseparable from 'contextualisation', or interpretation. The OED defines 'context' as 'The whole structure of a connected passage regarded in its bearing upon any of the parts which constitute it; the parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or 'text' and determine the meaning.' The Latin root of the term, *contextus*, means 'connection' and *contexere* 'to weave together' or 'connect'. To place something in context is then to specify its connection with other items, be they objects, acts, events etc.

The claim of contextualists is that there is only one right way to do this, i.e. by describing objects in socio-historical terms, whether this means in terms of the intentions of a specific author, or in terms of an ideological or discursive formation.<sup>1</sup> Such interpretations focus on how ideas have developed, or what function they perform in particular cultures or eras. As the rhetoric of the historians of political thought suggests, these interpretations are thought to be more concrete, more realistic than the 'abstractions' of philosophers. The claim that socio-historical interpretations present their objects as they really are, as products of particular societies, has problematic implications for the conduct of moral criticism however, insofar as it promotes a reductive, relativist account of morality.

I propose to challenge the idea that socio-historical interpretation is privileged in this way by questioning the claim that any range of description is more

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<sup>1</sup> I include here the historians of political thought, Dunn and Skinner, but also Marxist and feminist and communitarian critics of 'abstraction'. See, for example, Marx on his fellow philosophers in The German Ideology, Collected Works Vol. 5 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), p.23-4, or the claim made by Nancy Hartsock that 'masculine' thought is essentially abstract in contrast to feminine/feminist thought, in 'The Feminist Standpoint: towards a specifically feminist historical materialism,' in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka eds.) Discovering Reality, (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), pp.283-310. See Rorty's scepticism about 'universalist' morality in Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.196.

fundamental than any other. To suppose that a particular range of description, or standpoint, can be shown to be more fundamental than any other, that it can be shown to form the basis of an absolute conception of the world is to adopt a foundationalist stance. By contrast, this view of interpretation is anti-foundationalist: it rests upon a conceptual pluralism, on which view no range of description can be shown to be fundamental.<sup>2</sup> On this view, neither the particularising categories of sociologists and historians, nor the abstractions of philosophers can be accorded metaphysical primacy. Objects may be described in a plurality of ways: the task of the interpreter is to determine which of these are relevant to the questions she poses, whether historical, philosophical, or moral.

The main aim of developing this account of interpretation is to provide an alternative to reductive understandings of context and interpretation. The argument is based on the insight that we cannot separate context from interpretation. If there are a plurality of ways to interpret something, then there are a plurality of contexts or sets of significant relations in which it can be said to belong: there is no single 'authentic' context independent of our interpretive projects.

This provides a basis for considering the relationship between contextualisation and social criticism. Once we have established that interpretation need not be restricted to particularising as opposed to universalising schemes, or to socio-historical description/explanation instead of normative deliberation, then we can turn our attention to the proper relations between these interpretive schemes. The argument of this thesis is that socio-historical contextualisation is not irrelevant to social criticism and democratic deliberation, but that once its connection to normative themes is clarified it can be shown to be central to these projects, without surrendering to relativism. The account of context and interpretation set out in what follows is the first step towards clarifying the connections between these questions.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hilary Putnam, Reason, Truth and History; Nicholas Rescher, Pluralism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Thomas Nagel, who qualifies as a pluralist to the extent that he subscribes to an anti-reductionist stance with respect to the tension between what he calls 'subjective' and 'objective' views, in The View From Nowhere.

### *Context and Reduction.*

Consider the difficulty of trying to limit the range of descriptions which may be correctly applied to an object. Take a familiar example discussed by Elizabeth Anscombe: a man is pumping water into the cistern of a house. The source has been poisoned, with the aim of poisoning the inhabitants of the house into which the water is being pumped (Anscombe suggests that the individuals are political leaders of some sort, and that their being poisoned might avert some great evil).<sup>3</sup> Now we could say of this man that he is (1) moving his arm, (2) operating a pump (3) replenishing the water supply (4) poisoning the inhabitants of the house. Anscombe's problem is this: is there any description of the action which is *the* description of the action?<sup>4</sup> Before answering this she encounters a further problem: should we say that there are four actions here, or should we say that there is one action under four descriptions? Our choices about how to describe the action seem in this way to reach into the action itself. Anscombe concludes that we can speak of *one* action under four *descriptions* where we can serially order the actions concerned such that the final term is the action for which the preceding actions were performed, i.e. instead of listing each action: moving his arm, operating the pump etc., we could simply say that the man was poisoning the inhabitants of the house: 'For moving his arm up and down with his fingers around the pump handle *is*, in these circumstances, operating the pump; and in these circumstances, it *is* replenishing the water supply; and in these circumstances, it *is* poisoning the household.'<sup>5</sup> The series is that of means-end ordering and in these circumstances we can just as easily speak of one action and one intention as we can of four actions and four intentions.

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Anscombe, *Intention*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p.37.

<sup>5</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p.46.

However, it would be wrong to read Anscombe as proposing some sort of reductive account here, for although the means-end ordering of the series allows one description to 'swallow' others, it does not rule out other descriptions which cannot be so included. Anscombe herself suggests that if the man were beating out the rhythm of 'God save the King' as he pumped, then this would not belong to the series just outlined, i.e. while the moving of his arm is essential to the beating out of the rhythm, this latter is not a means to pumping the water into the cistern, or poisoning the inhabitants of the house, and so would constitute a separate action. Of course what are described here are simply intentional actions, i.e. actions about which we might raise the question 'why?' In discussing an earlier example Anscombe observes that any description of a man's actions (call that man ' $\chi$ ') which have  $\chi$  as the subject will in fact be true, regardless of that person's intentions. Thus if our pump operator was wholly unaware that the water was poisoned, he could still be said to be poisoning the household, or averting some great disaster in bringing it about that they were poisoned. It could also be true to say that he was earning wages, paying a debt, wearing away the soles of his shoes, making a disturbance in the air, sweating, relaxing and contracting his muscles, producing various chemical reactions in his body, etc.<sup>6</sup> We could go on: we can imagine this being described as an episode in the class war; the destruction of the environment through the lowering of the water table; the continuance of a traditional pattern of labour, or the employing of antiquated technology; the operation of a system of levers; the conversion of carbohydrates into energy and motion; or the sending of electrical impulses through the nervous system.

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<sup>6</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p.37. In an earlier example, a man is sawing a log. This can be variously described as 'sawing a piece of oak, sawing one of Smith's planks, making a squeaky noise with a saw, making a great deal of sawdust etc.' (p.11) Compare a remark of Wittgenstein's, 'I might make with my hand the movement I should make if I were holding a hand-saw and sawing through a plank; but would one have any right to call this movement *sawing*, out of all context? - (It might be something quite different!).' Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (1969) G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979)(section 350). MacIntyre presents a similar example, of a man digging, with the aim of supporting the claim that 'Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterisation of human actions.' *After Virtue*, (London: Duckworth, 1981), p.194.

These latter descriptions may be puzzling: are these actions performed by  $\chi$ , or are they happenings, i.e. events? We have noted that how we choose to describe what is going on can carve this 'going on' into one action or four: here we could say that we can also carve it up according to an intentional vocabulary of action descriptions, or a non-intentional vocabulary of physical events. This is where we might begin to feel that of the variety of things we can say about this 'going on' that some are more basic than others, i.e. that some are a matter of perspective while others actually tell us what is really going on, and that these are typically those which belong to the physical-event language of the natural sciences.

The pressure to accept such a view is quite strong and clearly draws support from the immense prestige which the natural sciences enjoy in our culture. Philosophers in the analytic tradition in particular may feel the pressure to accept such a naturalistic account as that which captures what is 'really going on' especially strongly, for such a position is often regarded not as one view within analytic philosophy, but as identical with analytic philosophy *per se*.<sup>7</sup> Historically speaking, this view has much to commend it, although I think we must distinguish between reductionism and naturalism. From its origins, analytic philosophy was committed to a picture of analysis as reduction, where this meant the project of translating the complexity of natural languages into the elements of an ideal language, the components of which mirrored the world and were systematically related to each other, like a calculus. In the hands of Russell and the early Wittgenstein the emphasis of analysis fell on the logical form of this ideal language, and it is only with the rise of logical positivism that the project took an explicitly naturalistic turn.<sup>8</sup> In the post-war

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<sup>7</sup> See Philip Pettit's 'The contribution of analytical philosophy' in A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy, Philip Pettit and Robert Goodin (eds.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp.7-38. Also the 'Preface' to Metaphysics and Morality, P. Pettit, R. Sylvan and J. Norman (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> J. O. Urmson notes the dissatisfaction of the logical positivists with the metaphysics of logical atomism. Note that despite the similar conception of analysis, the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus defined the world as the totality of 'facts', and not as the totality of material things. Philosophical Analysis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).



era however, the emergence of ordinary language philosophy, with its radically different conception of analysis on one hand, and Quine's attack on the notion of analytic truth *per se* on the other hand, have contributed to the demise of the earlier, reductive, picture of analysis.<sup>9</sup> Not unrelated to this we have also seen attempts to develop an explicitly non-reductive naturalism, such as that of Donald Davidson for example.<sup>10</sup>

The idea that we should identify 'what's really going on' with 'what's really going on, as described in the language of physics' was obviously a central tenet of positivism but this is itself bound up with certain features of modern culture in general, and modern, i.e. post-seventeenth century, philosophy in particular. These features may be gathered under the headings of 'foundationalism' and 'epistemology'.<sup>11</sup> The former refers broadly to the idea that there are foundations for our moral and epistemic commitments which all rational persons must endorse and from which we may deductively arrive at sound beliefs. The particular form which the search for foundations has taken since the seventeenth century is that of the search for epistemological foundations, i.e. foundations of knowledge. This approach has been taken to be a problem about explaining the relationship between objective reality and subjective mental representations of it.<sup>12</sup> Stated in these general terms, it is clear that both empiricism and idealism in their various forms are equally derived from this model of knowledge.

Various currents in contemporary philosophy express a dissatisfaction with this foundationalism, although there is little enough agreement as to what the precise problem is, and how best to respond to it. It is unnecessary to seek to untangle these

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<sup>9</sup> W.V.O Quine 'Two dogmas of empiricism' reprinted in From a Logical Point of View, (1953), (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp.20-46.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Davidson 'Actions, reasons and causes,' in Essays on Actions and Events, pp.3-20.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor emphasises this difference in 'Overcoming Epistemology,' in Philosophical Arguments, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.1-19.

<sup>12</sup> For the history of this problematic and its decisive influence upon modern philosophy see Richard Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

here, let me only try to indicate three problems as they bear on the question of context. The first problem is that of the idea of an absolute or 'God's eye view' of the world as a goal of our enquiries. This view gives rise to the attempt to reduce the plurality of ways we have of talking about or more broadly, dealing with, the world, to some more basic, more fundamental, set of ideas. Historically, the language of science and of physics in particular has been identified as that which provides the true view of how things are. Having said that, the idea of the absolute view can inspire a host of other reductivisms, among which I would include that of the historians of speech acts, Skinner and Dunn. In Dunn, a prejudice in favour of causal explanation is evident and undermines his explicit attempts to outline a pluralist (dualist in Dunn's case) argument. Skinner rejects such positivism, but his own argument hinges on the idea that there is only one way to understand an utterance, and in this way it reflects a hostility to pluralism which may be traced back to the influence of the idea that there is an absolute view of the world to be had, a single version of reality.

A second problem is that the 'subject' is treated primarily in terms of the problem of knowledge. This gives rise to a tendency to think of our basic relation to the world as that of representing or mirroring it in consciousness, while neglecting, for example, the idea that we are also agents within the world, or that we are communicators with other subjects.<sup>13</sup> One way in which this is significant is that it gives rise to ideas about objectivity, in ethics as much as in epistemology itself, which emphasises detachment and passivity over activity and engagement.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, a third problem is that this idea of the epistemological subject and the idea that knowledge is founded on private mental representations distort the way we

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<sup>13</sup> Pragmatism is founded on the idea that we are agents rather than spectators. See Hilary Putnam, Pragmatism, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Habermas objects to the monological account of reason which is founded on the epistemological view, and favours instead, a communicative conception of reason based on the idea of intersubjective communication, rather than upon the 'philosophy of the subject.' See Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, F. Lawrence (trans.) (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> See Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); David Couzens Hoy, 'A history of consciousness: from Kant to Hegel to Derrida and Foucault,' History of the Human Sciences 4 (1991), pp.261-81.

think about communication with others. The 'linguistic turn' in modern philosophy may be regarded as based on a burgeoning recognition of the shortcomings of this view, but equally, the project of epistemology can be seen as having a decisive effect upon the understanding of language inasmuch as the task of mirroring the world is transferred from the subject's mental representations to language itself. Austin points to this when he objects to the concentration of philosophers upon descriptive uses of language rather than upon the performative use of language. The idea that language itself derives meaning from its relation to the private mental representations of the subject is another legacy of the project of epistemology and it gives rise to the idea that understanding is a matter of gaining access to the minds of others. This view will be examined in the next chapter, but here I wish to concentrate upon the idea of the absolute view and its implications for contextualisation.

My concern here is not so much with naturalism, as naturalism is only one possible version of reductionism, as with the idea that *any* vocabulary could claim to provide the sole comprehensive picture of how things are. We can call this picture, the picture of an 'absolute' or 'God's eye view'. Most often such a view is identified with that picture of the world supposedly presented by 'science'. 'Science' is a rather vague term however, for it leaves open the question as to which of the possible scientific accounts is the right one: that of physics, chemistry or biology? Quine, for example, is committed not simply to naturalism but to physicalism: taking the language of physics as that which is best suited for 'limning the ultimate structure of reality'.<sup>15</sup> What is striking is the way this idea figures in ordinary discourse, and it is here that, however inarticulately expressed, we find the 'God's eye view' impinging on ethical and political questions. Even where our picture of 'how things are' is only vaguely outlined and not obviously translatable into the language of physics, our sense of the rightness of this picture gains support from the belief that it is underwritten *in some way* by

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<sup>15</sup> See Christopher Hookway, *Quine*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1988). Also Hilary Putnam's 'A comparison of something with something else,' in *Words and Life*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.330-50.

'science'. Some would say that this requires a rather old-fashioned view of science, but be that as it may, it is important to see why we must reject the idea of the 'absolute' view if we are to arrive at a clearer understanding of contextualisation.<sup>16</sup>

Hilary Putnam calls this philosophical version of the idea of a God's eye view, 'metaphysical realism.' As Putnam characterises it, there is both an ontological and epistemological component to this view: (1) The world 'consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects,' and there is 'exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is.' (2) 'Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought signs and the external things and sets of things.'<sup>17</sup> Analytic philosophy took over the epistemological project of explaining how ideas, thought of as mental images, resembled the world and turned it into the project of explaining how words 'hook on to the world'. The project of delineating the 'God's eye view' is thus one of determining how words refer: the assumption being that only a certain vocabulary, that of an ideal language actually hooks onto reality in the right way.

Philosophers like Putnam and Rorty object, however, that there is no way to make sense of this idea. Originally this is explained in terms of the similarity of mental representations to objective reality. The difficulty with this is that it presupposes this very similarity in order to explain it.<sup>18</sup> More recently there have been attempts to provide a 'causal' account of reference which circumvents the problems associated with the idea that mental representations intervene between the mind and reality, with reference as a matter of similarity between these and the external world. These theories begin from the uncontested fact that we causally interact with the world, and attempt to harness this fact to explain how we come to possess concepts which refer to the world. However, as Putnam points out, there is a crucial difference

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<sup>16</sup> Putnam emphasises the way in which modern physics is indeterministic and indicates that philosophers who cling to mechanism are, in his view, simply in the grip of 'intellectual fashion'. 'The place of facts in a world of values,' in Realism with a Human Face, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.154.

<sup>17</sup> Putnam, Reason, Truth and History, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.49.

<sup>18</sup> Putnam, Reason, Truth and History, p.51.

between causation and reference such that the causes of our coming to possess concepts are not identical with the objects to which these concepts refer. Thus while we might suppose that we come to possess the concept of electrons through interacting with them, the cause of our having (true) beliefs about them is usually *textbooks*. Furthermore, this view cannot be saved by attempting to exclude the 'wrong sort of causes' and specifying the 'appropriate type of cause' for such an attempt clearly presupposes that which it purports to explain, namely reference.

Any attempt to claim the status of a 'God's eye view' for any particular conceptual framework must meet the challenge of explaining its privileged status as that framework which contains the concepts which 'really refer'. As Putnam has indicated however, this task cannot be carried out without circularity. The conclusion we should draw, however, is not that we never refer, but rather that we refer in a plurality of ways, none of which can claim a privileged status over another.<sup>19</sup>

If no way of talking about the world is any more fundamental than any other, does this not mean that we must give up the idea that some of what we say is true? Pluralism, however, is not devoid of the objectivity necessary for rational disagreement. Indeed, we should not forget that metaphysical realism has typically provided more support for relativism than its adherents might suppose. For while a reductive naturalism may seem to support common-sense realism, in fact it has often served to undermine the view that ethics may be the subject of rational discussion.<sup>20</sup> This is because the claim that the concepts of the natural sciences are the only ones which truly represent 'how the world is' renders the status of ethical concepts problematic. Positivism, a version of metaphysical realism, treated ethical concepts as mere 'projections' onto the world as opposed to reflections of it. It is a short step from treating ethical concepts as not founded in reality as such, to treating them as simply

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<sup>19</sup> Rorty points out that philosophical discussions have typically relied on a technical sense of 'refer' which in his view is unrelated to our ordinary notion of 'talking about'. Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p.292.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as Putnam suggests, its relation to common-sense realism usually turns out to be fairly tenuous as well! Putnam, The Many faces of Realism, (Illinois: Open Court, 1987).

expressions of subjective taste concerning which there can be no truth or falsity, right or wrong. It can hardly be said that philosophers have coped any better with the assumed truth of reduction than non-experts, for it is notorious that the emergence and development of a rigorously analytic philosophy was accompanied by a decline in Anglo-American moral and political philosophy, and that only with the demise of this project did these fields come to receive the attention they deserved. Prior to this, non-cognitivist metaethics sought to account for ethical statements simply as prescriptions or attempts to influence others. In view of the connection between metaphysical realism and ethical relativism, the rejection of metaphysical realism is better regarded as a premise of normative political theory rather than as a threat to it.

Once we can see that the demand for a God's eye view does not make any sense, we need not give in to the sense that any particular conceptual framework is more fundamental, 'more true' than any other.<sup>21</sup> We must recognise that there are a plurality of ways of talking about the world, which is to say that the only limits to the ways we have for saying 'how the world is' are the limits of our language.<sup>22</sup> The view set out here may be termed 'conceptual pluralism' in contrast to 'foundationalism'. What are the implications of this pluralism? In particular, does it amount to a relativist view of some sort, in which no way of talking about the world is to be preferred to any other? Pluralism is *not* a relativism because abandoning foundationalism does not amount to abandoning objectivity in relation to knowledge or ethics. The idea that the world is independent of what we think about it, and the idea that morality is neither the invention of individuals, nor of communities, remain in place on this view. What is questioned is the claim made for any particular range of description to be more *fundamental* than any other. The claim to absoluteness and the reductionist view that goes with it is distinct from the ideas of truth and falsity, rightness and wrongness. We

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<sup>21</sup> Putnam expresses this as the pointless attempt to determine 'which kind of 'true' is really Truth.' See 'Truth and Convention,' in Realism with a Human Face, pp.96-104, p.98.

<sup>22</sup> Which is different from the idealist thought that the limits of language are the limits of the world.

can judge, for example, that it is true that an object is better described as red rather than some other colour, i.e. we are not free to ignore the facts of the matter, but we cannot go on to claim that colour descriptions present us with the ultimate truth about the world, in contrast to spatial or temporal descriptions, for example. It is only the claim made for certain ranges of description to be more securely rooted in reality than any other that is denied by conceptual pluralists. On a conceptual pluralist view we have too many possible true statements to choose from, rather than it being the case that the truth of our statements about the world is illusory in some way. Too often, critics of naturalism's claim to constitute an absolute conception of the world go on to reject the notions of truth and objectivity altogether, when all that is necessary is to expose the incoherence of the claim that any range of description could constitute the 'whole' truth or the 'final' truth about anything, in virtue of its foundational status.

This does not mean, then, that in rejecting foundationalism we have rejected the idea of objectivity, for this can be separated from the foundationalist idea that some range of description could be shown to be absolute. Thomas Nagel forcefully argues this case, claiming that while the idea of providing an objective, i.e. impersonal, description of the world is important both for knowledge and morality, this objective range of description cannot constitute an absolute conception of the world, i.e. it can never amount to a *complete* description of it.<sup>23</sup> Objective descriptions are just one possible way of talking about the world which exist alongside and in an uneasy relationship with subjective descriptions, neither of which can be shown to be more fundamental than the other. Indeed, Nagel argues, many problems arise from the attempt to reduce the inevitable tension between these two different ways of describing the world by taking one or other as fundamental. If we treat objective description not as absolute, but as one possible way of viewing the world, one which tries to 'include' the subjective view by treating it as one of the contents of the world, objectively

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<sup>23</sup> Objectivity is 'essentially incomplete'. Nagel, The View from Nowhere, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.18.

described, then we can retain objectivity, while rejecting claims to absoluteness and, furthermore, we can exploit the idea that there are different types and levels of objective description for the purposes of social criticism.<sup>24</sup>

Given this irreducible plurality of conceptual 'schemes' which may legitimately be applied to the world, how are we to think of their relations to each other? In what ways do they include or exclude each other? This plurality of possible descriptions can be handled in a variety of ways, by devices such as: distinguishing between 'levels of description'; distinguishing descriptions in temporal terms; and distinguishing between parts of objects, i.e. employing the device of complexity. The first allows that different statements may be true of the same object because one is more general than the other and, being situated at different levels, cannot conflict. For example, one may say both that Socrates was a man, but also that he was a Greek man, i.e. a particular type of man. The device of temporality allows us to render compatible descriptions which might otherwise be thought contradictory: disputes about the colour of an object can be resolved by pointing out that it was blue at one time, but red at another. The device of complexity can resolve similar disputes by distinguishing between parts of the object concerned, such that one could say it was both red and blue, insofar as some parts are identifiable as blue and the others as red.

These devices can resolve a variety of possible conflicts of interpretation, but they cannot resolve all conflicts. Some conflicts cannot be explained away with reference to pluralism and the devices employed to manage it. For example, the difference between Skinner's speech-act-centred interpretive project and Foucault's notion of an archaeology of discourse cannot be reconciled by appeal to the device of distinguishing between levels of description. Foucault, of course, allows that individual speech acts may be one of the types of object which may feature in his discourse centred contextualisations, but this rests on a view about the nature of speech acts

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<sup>24</sup> Objectivity 'is simply the step of conceiving the world as a place that includes the person within it, as just another of its contents - conceiving myself from outside, in other words.' Nagel, The View from Nowhere, p.63.



which Skinner denies, namely that speech acts are themselves open to a variety of different descriptions, not necessarily conceived by the author. On a certain, pluralist, understanding of speech acts, intended meanings can figure in a larger interpretive scheme, but only on this pluralist understanding. The idea of conceptual pluralism does not entail a relativist view of the substantive issue between Skinner and Foucault: that of the role of the subject as the originator of meaning. For Skinner the author determines the meaning of his actions, while Foucault rejects this view.<sup>25</sup> While we may not wish to adopt Foucault's Nietzschean view of the subject, the pluralist view certainly entails the denial of Skinner's view of the constitution of meaning.

Pluralism does not then entail the evasion of substantive disagreements. It is also the case, however, that there are certain disagreements which cannot be resolved. These specially intractable disputes are caused by the open and pluralist character of our conceptual resources themselves, giving rise to the phenomenon of essential contestability.<sup>26</sup> Disputes may be characterised as resting upon essentially contestable concepts when alternative ways of conceptualising something come into conflict because one way of conceptualising the object in question excludes the other. In such cases, neither an appeal to further facts, nor to further analysis can help, for what count as relevant facts is dependent precisely upon what is at issue, i.e. how one conceives of the object concerned. Consider the problem about whether or not foetuses are human beings. On one view, aborting a foetus is killing a human being, and therefore counts as murder, while on another view, foetuses are not human beings, and aborting them cannot be murder.<sup>27</sup> On a foundationalist view of our conceptual tools, this sort of

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<sup>25</sup> Foucault, 'What is an author?'

<sup>26</sup> The idea is first set out by W. B. Gallie, 'Essentially contested concepts,' Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 56 (1955-6), pp.167-98. See also William Connolly, The Terms of Political Discourse, (1974) 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), and John Gray, 'On the contestability of social and political concepts,' Political Theory 5 (1977), pp.331-48.

<sup>27</sup> National identities provide another example: on one, 'nationalist' or 'republican' view of what it is to be 'Irish', this excludes the possibility that one could be 'British', while on one 'unionist' view at least, the two are compatible, with 'British' operating as the more general concept. In practice, the conceptual aspect of this dispute has receded, as unionists have increasingly accepted the republican view of 'Irishness', while denying that they themselves are 'Irish' in any sense. The progressive

conflict could not arise: we should be able to show that one of these ways of conceptualising the disputed object was more fundamental than the other. The lesson of pluralism is that while we can often employ the device of distinguishing between levels of description, there are not only a plurality of ways of conceiving the world but there is also no way to show that one of these ranges of description can be shown to serve as a foundation which would in principle enable us to resolve all such disputes by means of distinguishing levels of description.

A conceptual pluralism may not pretend to resolve such disputes, but recognition that these are possible and that this possibility is built into our conceptual framework itself is important insofar as it points to the possibility that persistent disputes cannot always be explained in terms of the ignorance, irrationality or bad faith of our interlocutors. This in turn should bear upon how we respond to such disputes, for if disagreement is judged 'reasonable' then it must be accommodated in ways which 'unreasonable' disagreement need not.<sup>28</sup> It should be emphasised, however, that conceptual pluralism is distinct from ethical pluralism, for recognition of the former is insufficient to warrant the latter: the move from conceptual pluralism to ethical pluralism relies upon a substantive normative commitment to respecting the freedom of others to order their lives according to their own values and principles.<sup>29</sup> Within this normative pluralism however, conceptual pluralism can serve to extend our understanding of the extent of reasonable disagreement.

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elimination of the conceptual contestability concerning these identities has not been accompanied by a reduction in the level of the political conflict over them. Rather, it could be said that the reduction of conflict at the conceptual level has been a response to the sharpening of the political conflict. See Jennifer Todd and Joseph Ruane: 'In surveys over two thirds of Protestants now identify themselves as British, a quarter as either Ulster or Northern Irish, and a small minority (3 per cent) as Irish. This appears to mark a radical change from Rose's 1968 pre-Troubles survey where 39 per cent identified as British, 20 per cent as Irish, and 32 per cent as Ulster.' Todd and Ruane, The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1996) p.60.

<sup>28</sup> This is the point of Rawls' elaboration of the 'burdens of judgement' in Political Liberalism, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 54-8.

<sup>29</sup> This does not entail respect for pluralism *per se*, but only for 'reasonable' pluralism. Some outlooks rely upon the oppression of other persons and cannot themselves be the objects of respect or toleration. See Walzer for the variety of normative responses to pluralism, from forbearance to the positive valuation of difference in On Toleration, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

### *Pragmatism and Pluralism.*

The implications of this conceptual pluralism for the notion of context are considerable: it means that we can trace as many connections as there are schemes which permit us to do so: the range of true things we can say when we set out to contextualise is immense, perhaps infinite. Dunn is perplexed by the existence of two sorts of schemes: one which traces causal connections and one which traces the 'rational' connections of a narrative. As we saw earlier, he tries unsuccessfully to reconcile these two. He proposes that in order to complete either sort of account one must complete both. Might we not reinstate some sort of external perspective by adopting some such strategy, and simply set out to provide a complete account of the object under investigation? i.e. to sort it into all of the possible schemes it may figure in? In tracing all of the possible connections it may figure in we should have built up a complete picture of it, or, to use Dunn's phrase, we should have 'closed' the context. The thesis seems to be that there is no successful interpretation without a complete specification of the context. This is mistaken in two ways.

Firstly, I do not think we can take talk of 'closing' the context seriously. In what sense can a context, a set of connections, be said to be either 'open' or 'closed'? If 'closed' means 'fully specified' then Dunn greatly underestimates the difficulties of achieving this end. While he is dealing here with only two schemes, it follows from what I have been saying that there are many, many more schemes which could be successfully applied, and our prospects of ever completing our account of them are remote, not only because of the vast number of schemes we already have in our repertoire, but also in virtue of our capacity to invent new ones. Thus I can say of Hobbes' Leviathan that it belongs to the set of:

all books written by Hobbes

all texts of political theory

all books written in English

all books published in the seventeenth century

all books ordered to be burned at Oxford

all books containing a theory of sovereignty

all books which constitute an episode in the history of the idea of sovereignty

all books which are not about cooking

all books that are on a reading list at the LSE

all books owned by me

all books owned by me and read before 1990

and so on..., including all true statements produced by any combination of possible true statements we can make. To be sure, we may have little use for many of the schemes we could invent, but the point is that, given the possibilities of combination and of invention, the set of all connections in which an object may figure is one which may never be fully specified and consequently the context can never be 'closed'.<sup>30</sup> What this suggests is that if it is not possible to achieve an absolute view in this indirect fashion, it cannot be the case that successful interpretation, explanation, or understanding depend upon the construction of such a picture.

An example thrown up by the dispute over the role of covering laws in historical explanation will serve to clarify this point. William Dray argues that, 'there is an irreducible pragmatic dimension to explanation' and this holds for the correlative concept of understanding.<sup>31</sup> He is concerned to reject the covering law theorists' identification of explanation with prediction on the basis of identifying the relevant covering laws. He argues that this definition actually departs quite radically from our ordinary use of the concept of explanation, which at that time was said by the OED to mean: 'to smooth out, to unfold, to give details of, to make plain or intelligible, to clear of obscurity or difficulty.'<sup>32</sup> What ordinarily counts as explanation rarely involves the

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<sup>30</sup> See Elgin's discussion of Goodman's 'grue' and 'bleen' for the invention, and projectability of predicates. This argument plays a central role in Goodman's 'second problem of induction'. Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, *Reconceptions In Philosophy*, (London: Routledge. 1988).

<sup>31</sup> Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History*, p.69.

<sup>32</sup> Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History*, p.76.

instantiation of covering laws and what is crucial is rather the context in which the request for an explanation arises, i.e. its connection to the person asking, their level of background knowledge, and their particular interest, along with the relevant stage setting conventions. By way of an example, Dray invites us to imagine a motorist asking a mechanic why his car won't go, to which the mechanic replies: 'there's a leak in the oil reservoir.'<sup>33</sup> Dray's point is that there are contexts in which this is either too little information ('I can see that!') or too much ('what's an oil reservoir?') to count as a successful explanation, even though the statement may be perfectly true.

Dray then entertains the possibility that someone dissatisfied with this explanation, on the grounds that it is incomplete, might request ever more specific casual explanations ('and what caused that? and that?'). This is not simply a problem about the potential regress in explanation Dray suggests, but rather 'a person who adopts the policy of always refusing to accept  $\chi$  as an explanation of  $\gamma$ , unless the  $\chi$  is itself explained, begins to empty the term 'explanation' of its normal meaning.'<sup>34</sup> We can make no sense of the idea of explanation outside the pragmatic context in which an explanation was called for and offered. There are many things which may count as an explanation, and true statements alone may fail to produce understanding.

The person who asks for a 'complete account' is in the same position as one who is caught in a regress of casual explanations. It is not the case that we must understand everything in order to understand something, for that is simply not what we mean by understanding. The nagging suspicion that giving up the notion of a 'God's eye view' means that knowledge and understanding will be deprived of their basis is mistaken. We simply do not need an exhaustive description of some phenomenon in order to have true descriptions, successful reference, or useful explanations. In order

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<sup>33</sup> Dray, Laws and Explanation in History, p.67.

<sup>34</sup> The point is not that there can be no covering law explanation on account of the regress involved, for on Dray's pragmatic account there can, and there are contexts in which this style of explanation may be appropriate. The regress emerges, he points out, only if we adopt the policy of changing our question. However, provided we ask only one question at a time, no regress emerges. Once the pragmatic dimension of explanation is recognised, we can accept covering law explanation as one among a variety of explanations. Dray, Laws and Explanation in History, p.72.

to fill out this picture in more detail, and avoid potential misunderstandings of its implications, it will be helpful to look a little closer at Collingwood's notion of a 'logic of question and answer'.<sup>35</sup>

The historian, on Collingwood's account, must seek evidence which will enable him to grasp what problems a historical actor conceived himself as trying to solve. His acts or statements are to be regarded as attempts to solve that problem. Collingwood says,

...you cannot find out what a man means simply by studying his spoken or written statements, even though he has spoken or written with perfect command of language and perfectly truthful intention. In order to find out his meaning you must know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.<sup>36</sup>

Note that the problems to be identified are the problems which the actor thought himself to be facing, i.e. the situation as it struck him at the time, and not as it might have struck another. Collingwood insists on marking the difference: 'people will speak of a savage as 'confronted by the eternal problem of obtaining food.' But what really confronts him is the problem, quite transitory like all things human, of spearing fish, or digging up this root, or finding blackberries in the wood.'<sup>37</sup>

Now if the actor is engaged in a problem-solving activity, so too is the historian, for that, as Collingwood suggests, is simply what thought *is*:

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<sup>35</sup> R. G. Collingwood, An Autobiography, S. Toulmin (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>36</sup> Collingwood, An Autobiography, p.31.

<sup>37</sup> Collingwood, An Autobiography, p.33.

...the difference between conceiving and executing a purpose [is] not correctly described as the difference between a theoretical act and a practical one. To conceive a purpose or form an intention is already a practical activity. It is not thought forming an anteroom to action, it is action itself in its initial stages.<sup>38</sup>

The historian's problem is to discover the problems faced by those he is investigating, and this search for knowledge is itself a practical activity. Not surprisingly, he is scathing in his criticisms of those positivist historians who conceive of themselves as merely collecting facts. What these people neglect is the 'questioning method' of the critical historian, who must bring judgement and imagination to bear on the material. The historian's questions convert the 'data' into 'evidence', i.e. material which is judged relevant to the task of identifying the thought of the actor.<sup>39</sup> 'Imagination' comes into play when the historian seeks to work his material into a coherent form in order to answer the question: what problem did she think she faced when she did/said  $\chi$ ? Collingwood draws an explicit analogy between the historian and the novelist: 'Each aims at making his picture a coherent whole, where every character and every situation is so bound up with the rest that this character in this situation cannot but act in this way, and we cannot imagine him as acting otherwise.'<sup>40</sup> He provides an elaborate illustration of this at one point, with an Agatha Christie type scenario, in which our detective builds up a narrative question by question.

Collingwood also insists that certain constraints operate upon the construction of historical narratives: they are meant to be true, and so must be 'localised' to time and

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<sup>38</sup> Collingwood, The Idea of History, T. M. Knox (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.312.

<sup>39</sup> Collingwood actually claims at one point, that 'there are properly speaking no data', The Idea of History, p.243.

<sup>40</sup> Collingwood, The Idea of History, p.245.

place, be consistent with other narratives, and take account of all the evidence.<sup>41</sup> Collingwood gives this questioning method the status of a logic, a 'logic of question and answer' and argues that it can supplant formal logic. Using another automobile repair example, he draws attention to the idea that there are 'levels' of questioning, and that a question and answer must be correlative at a certain level: the 'detailed and particularised' or the 'vague and general' if they are to have the right sort of fit. Thus, if while trying to fix my car I eventually come to examine one of the plugs, and, finding that it is indeed working, I say, 'number one plug is alright' this, Collingwood claims, would be an answer to the question 'is it because number one plug is not working that my car won't go?' and not an answer to the more general question: 'why won't my car go?' Collingwood calls this the 'principle of correlativity' and uses it to dispose of 'claptrap' such as the suggestion noted above that the 'savage' might be confronted by the 'eternal problem of obtaining food'.

He continues to claim that the logic of question and answer has a bearing on the issue of contradiction insofar as unless we can be sure how someone meant a proposition, i.e. what question it was meant to answer, we cannot say with certainty that it contradicts any other statement. Only if we can establish that two propositions are intended as answers to the same question can there be any possibility of contradiction. Collingwood then extends the principle of correlativity to truth: 'If the meaning of a proposition is relative to the question it answers, its truth must be relative to the same thing'. He then adds,

Truth in the sense in which a philosophical theory or historical narrative is called true [...] which seemed to me the proper sense of the word - was something that belonged not to any single proposition, nor even, as the coherence theorists maintained, to a complex of

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<sup>41</sup> Collingwood, The Idea of History, p.245.



propositions taken together, but to a complex of questions and answers.<sup>42</sup>

Collingwood also enters a distinction, however, between truth and 'rightness' such that an answer may be 'right' without being true: by which he means that it is an appropriate, or justifiable answer to give in a particular context, even if it turns out on further examination to have been false.<sup>43</sup>

Collingwood, however, presents an overly formal model of pragmatic understanding when he presents it in the form of a logic: a logic which is supposed to do all the work which formal logic was supposed to do. In particular, this leads him to formulate the unnecessarily restrictive 'principle' of correlativity. The idea that there are 'levels' at which question and answer must correlate, seems to be a version of the idea that statements and responses must in some way be appropriate in a given situation. But we cannot apply this idea too rigidly: there may be a variety of 'appropriate' responses in a given situation. For example, there seems no reason for Collingwood to deny that a 'particular' statement, like 'number one plug is alright' can serve as an answer to a general question: 'why won't my car go?' Isn't it all too easy to imagine a context in which one might say such a thing? In demanding that we fill in the deductive relations here, Collingwood begins to resemble Dray's covering law theorist. We see the deleterious effects of this formalising at work in the example of the 'savage', when Collingwood insists that a general description of that person's problem cannot be right, and that the appropriate one is the most particular. But again, can't we imagine contexts in which the general description might serve a purpose?

Collingwood unnecessarily restricts his account of the role of questioning in understanding, both by imposing an artificially formal 'principle of correlativity' upon it, and in the way he conceives of historical inquiry, by restricting the range of questions

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<sup>42</sup> Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, pp.33 and 37.

<sup>43</sup> Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p.37.

which may be posed by historians concerning questions which may have been in the minds of the actors under investigation, a restriction all too readily accepted by intellectual historians like Quentin Skinner.<sup>44</sup> If thought is a practical activity, and understanding always relative to some problem or puzzlement which we seek to remove, why should we think of ourselves as restricted in this way? Doesn't it make sense to suggest that there are at least as many forms of puzzlement as there are schemes and responses which might, in certain situations, relieve us of the obstacles to our understanding? If our conceptual resources are as varied as I have been suggesting, then surely we can form an equally varied set of requests for explanation i.e. requests for contextualisation?

*Pragmatic Contextualisation and Social Criticism.*

What we have now is, first of all, a conceptual pluralism which rejects as misconceived the idea that any particular level or style of description can be understood as fundamental, the one which ultimately represents reality. Secondly, we have a pragmatic 'logic of question and answer' which connects this conceptual pluralism to our particular purposes, such that these help to determine what range of description is best in a given instance. What can we do with this account of interest driven, or pragmatic contextualisation? I think it can serve as a basis for a model of social criticism which does not display the reductive attitude to normative argument and theorising which existing models of contextualisation exhibit.

By rejecting the foundationalist idea that some ranges of description or standpoints can be shown to be more fundamental than others, independent of our

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<sup>44</sup> Gadamer, while he regards the 'structure of question and answer' as a central part of the 'hermeneutic phenomenon', and declares that 'the logic of the human sciences is a 'logic of the question', judges that 'compared with the hermeneutic experience that understands the meaning of the text, the reconstruction of what the author really had in mind is a limited understanding.' Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), p.336.

particular interests in the matter at hand, we can reconceive interpretation in pragmatic terms. This means that the way is open to approach the issue of interpretation and social criticism by asking what sort of interpretive schemes best serve the aims of social criticism? Given that social criticism aims at transforming or revising people's actually existing beliefs about themselves and their world, it should firstly focus on systematic relations between ideas: traditions, ideologies or discourses, for example, rather than on the intentions of individual authors. This is because social criticism aims at revealing unsuspected influences and features of one's beliefs. Secondly, social criticism need not restrict itself to particularising, e.g. social or historical schemes but may also make use of the generalising schemes of theory, for both can serve the task of redescription. Historical interpretation has no special privilege over theoretical analysis on this view.

This is not to say that all contextualisation must serve the purposes of social criticism, but only that it *can* do so. Some models of contextualisation, notably that of the historians of political thought, deny that it can serve such a purpose, while others, such as that of Marx, assume that it can, but think of how it does this in a reductive way. First of all, what do we understand by 'social criticism'? This is, in very general terms, the attempt to alter the beliefs of members of a particular society in order to persuade them to bring about social change.<sup>45</sup> This leaves open the question of the sort of change desired: whether institutions are to be made more just; classes to be emancipated; or persons to be made more virtuous. It also leaves open the sort of reasons one might appeal to in seeking to garner support for change. I will pick these questions up at a later stage when we come to look at different models of social criticism in more detail. What is common to different models of social criticism, whether Marxist, Foucauldian, or communitarian is that they aim at altering the existing beliefs of members of a particular society in some way, whether these are

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<sup>45</sup> See Max Horkheimer's contrast between 'critical' and 'traditional' theory in terms of the former's emancipatory aims. 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory*, M. T. O'Connell (trans.) (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).

beliefs about their own beliefs, about their practices, their institutions, or their relations with other societies. The nature of the desired alteration may also be thought of in a variety of ways: for some Marxists it is a matter of replacing false beliefs with true, whereas for Foucauldians it is perhaps just a matter of replacing existing beliefs with a plurality of different ones, and for communitarians like Michael Walzer, for example, this alteration may be seen as a matter of replacing one self-understanding with another, deeper one.<sup>46</sup> However the desired transformation of belief is thought of, it is clear that the core idea of social criticism is just this: a transformation of belief.

This is what connects social criticism with ideas about contextualisation, for transformation of belief is achieved by reinterpretation, recontextualisation, of existing beliefs. This is one reason why we must reject the historian's view of contextualisation. One could, of course, say that they too aim at a limited transformation of beliefs, in the sense that they hope that by placing political ideas in the 'proper' context they aim to transform our beliefs about these ideas, replacing false understandings with true ones. However, at the same time, Skinner's model of meaning denies the possibility of a certain vital sort of transformation, namely one's views about oneself and one's actions. Because the author is said to fix the meaning or the identity of his act once and for all, it is not only the case that others must, if they are to understand it correctly, understand it in this way, but also that the author himself must understand it in that way. Because his intentions in performing an act fix its meaning, he is subsequently in the same position with respect to it as everyone else, which is to say that it would be just as wrong for him to seek to redescribe it as it would be for anyone else. This denies the possibility that we can reinterpret ourselves, and our lives, and closes off the whole question of self-reflection. While Skinner's notion of the authority of the speaker rests on a certain strong view of the freedom of the subject with respect to meaning, it entails a radical curtailment of the freedom of the subject with respect to self-

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<sup>46</sup> The aim of Foucauldian criticism is not wholly clear, for reasons I will explore in more detail in Chapter Five. For Walzer's notion of the connected social critic as the interpreter of his society's values see his Interpretation and Social Criticism. See Chapter Four below for discussion of this model of criticism.

understanding, by denying that we could ever come to understand ourselves and our actions better than we did at the time we performed them. This possibility rests on the idea that acts can be redescribed in ways which take their meaning to be other than their intended meaning.<sup>47</sup>

Skinner, of course, thinks of contextualisation as a matter of doing 'good history' rather than as a way of engaging in social criticism, which is not surprising as his view of contextualisation could hardly serve as the basis for effective social criticism. We could seek to transform others' beliefs about the intentions of others perhaps, but it would be 'conceptually improper' to seek to transform people's beliefs about themselves, which is the central focus of social criticism. This suggests that the efficacy of his interpretive project for the purposes of defending a normative pluralism, in the sense that it serves to remind us of the essential variety of moral commitments, is extremely limited insofar as it must preclude any real *engagement* with others in different contexts. To engage with others and their beliefs in a normatively relevant manner involves more than simply discovering that people hold different beliefs or that they meant something other than what they thought they meant, but rather it is an engagement which is premised on the possibility of self-transformation, i.e. that one or other, or both of the parties involved could come to alter their understanding not only of the other but also of themselves in the light of their encounter. We could mark the difference between these two ways of conceiving of encounters with others as the difference between 'anthropological' encounters and deliberative or 'hermeneutic' encounters. The first of these is concerned only with establishing that others are different, while the latter is concerned not only with understanding the way in which

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<sup>47</sup> This is one reason why narrative conceptions of selfhood are attractive: they rely on the idea that we are never wholly transparent to ourselves, and for that reason our self-understandings are open to revision. This is not only because narratives are premised on the idea that the facts cannot be communicated at once, but must be revealed in a sequence, but also because narratives are open to retrospective reinterpretation. Alasdair MacIntyre seems to miss this point in his own treatment of narrative identity however, insofar as he prefers to emphasise the way that our identities are fixed by our situation in traditions, which themselves have the character of narratives: 'I am forever whatever I have been at any time for others...' MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p.202.

others differ from us, but with engaging in potentially transformative deliberations with others. This is an important distinction, inasmuch as it is widely thought that the major implication of the realisation that we are 'situated' in particular contexts is that our encounters with others can only, or must only, be of the anthropological sort. Typically, conceptual arguments of the sort proposed by Skinner are used to back up normative arguments about the propriety of seeking to transform the beliefs of others. I will be concerned to argue for the wider acceptance of the hermeneutic model over that of the anthropological model, which, it will be argued, is normatively unattractive as well as misconceived.

By contrast with Skinner's model of author-centred interpretation, a more useful model is provided by communitarian and radical social critics who locate the object of interpretation at the level of traditions, ideologies, and discourses, i.e. at the level of systematic relations between ideas and social institutions. These differ in ways which I will examine in Chapters Four and Five. However, the focus on this level of interpretation is correct insofar as social criticism is premised on the idea that we are not transparent to ourselves. That is to say, our context shapes our identities and perspectives in ways which we may not fully comprehend. The task of social criticism is to reveal these influences and enlarge our self understandings. For this reason, a contextualisation of ideas which treats them as having their meanings fixed by individual authors is unlikely to be helpful. Instead, we need an understanding of ideas which rests on the idea that these ideas have a certain objectivity, an institutional existence beyond the influence of individuals. Here it has been shown that the claim that the range of description used to identify an object can be fixed is unfounded. In the next chapter however, I will set out a social account of meaning which shows how meaning is precisely a social institution in the way a social criticism focused on traditions, ideologies or discourses supposes.

The question of the legitimacy of abstraction raises further questions about how we are to understand the idea of conceptual pluralism. It must be emphasised

once again that this is not a relativism: it does not entail the view that no characterisation is better than any other, only that we must reject the foundationalist thesis that one particular range of description is in every situation the best, most truthful characterisation. Collingwood suggested that an interpretation may be judged according to its truth and comprehensiveness, i.e. that a good interpretation must not contain false statements and that it must take account of all the relevant facts. The role of interest, or of the 'question', is to help to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant facts. This idea may be rather vague in the sense that a judgement about relevance may be open to question, but as long as one recognises that such judgements are always open to challenge, this does not itself present a problem. Even those wedded to the idea of an 'absolute' conception of the world should recognise that some such distinction would be necessary to circumvent the unbearable epistemic burdens that would be imposed by the view that we should have to present the 'whole truth' about some object.<sup>48</sup>

Any interpretation will contain references to a variety of objects: persons, physical objects, beliefs, actions, events, etc. and these will be described in a variety of ways, as deemed relevant. Having said that, the device of relevance does not allow us to describe things just as we please: our descriptions must themselves be true, and this raises questions about the compatibility of different descriptions.

Recognising that devices like that of distinguishing between levels of generality cannot solve all disputes about the soundness of an interpretation does not mean that we can never make use of such devices in this way, but only that there are limits to what we can accomplish with them. In cases of essential contestability the device does not work because the conflict is between rival schemes, i.e. schemes operating at the same level. Some, like Skinner and Collingwood, argue that the device of abstraction, by which they mean the application of more general descriptions to an object, is simply illegitimate. Collingwood's discussion certainly indicates that in

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<sup>48</sup> The view of contextualisation set out above is that the 'whole truth' could never be presented, as it would always be possible to set out further true statements about an object.

dialogue, getting the level of description at which the object of inquiry 'thought his thought' is important and it is a major influence upon Skinner's idea that the correct way to describe an act as its author intended it.<sup>49</sup> Why is it not permissible to move up and down the conceptual scale, as it were, by generalising or even further particularising an object, and why might we wish to do this?

One good reason for seeking more general descriptions is that this seems to reveal similarities which are not apparent at a lower level of description. By treating the 'savage's' construction of his animal trap as a particular instance of the search for food, we bring this action into a certain relationship with others which might otherwise have seemed unrelated, e.g. the activity of shopping in a supermarket. This in turn may have wider ramifications, for by revealing an important similarity, this can prompt us to reinterpret how our way of life resembles or differs from that of a supposedly 'primitive' person. We may wish to see the other in a more favourable light, or equally, see certain of our own practices in a less favourable light. By bringing otherwise unrelated things into relations of equivalence, generalising descriptions can serve to disturb our common sense ideas about ourselves and our world. Perhaps Collingwood goes astray because his example centres on the idea of conversation, of seeking to maintain communication, and for this reason, while implicitly recognising the disturbing power of redescriptions by means of generalisation, he deems it an illegitimate move. However, if our aim is social criticism, then we have an interest in disrupting and transforming common sense, and in this context, our redescriptions may be seen to have a purpose. Insofar as they have a purpose then, it is hard to see how Collingwood can object to such a move, for description and interest are related in the appropriate way.

One possible reason for denying this would seem to be provided by the adoption of a certain foundationalist attitude to 'thick' particularising socio-historical descriptions, such that these are deemed appropriate, regardless of the particular

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<sup>49</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', p.65.



interest one has in the matter at hand. This would appear to be Skinner's view, but this can now be seen to amount to no more than a contextualist prejudice, i.e. the view that socio-historical description is always the truest way to describe something, such that to place something 'in context' is always to offer such a description. This view is a species of foundationalism, for no range of description can legitimately be thought of as universally correct quite independently of our interests. Contextualisation is the process of interpreting an object by choosing characterisations which relate it to other objects in a particular way. Pluralism is its premise, i.e. the recognition that there is always another way to do this, other possible context. It does not entail any view about what sort of characterisation is best and could not entail such a view without foregoing the pluralist aspect of the idea of context. We might see this as simply a distinction between two different senses of the idea of context, but even the socio-historical use of the idea usually contains the idea of pluralism to the extent that it relies upon the claim that there are a plurality of socio-historical contexts in which we are severally 'situated'. To offer a socio-historical contextualisation is to make a pluralising move, as Skinner does, for example, when he argues that the function of his history is to remind us of the essential variety of moral commitments.

In this, of course, socio-historical contextualists are right: such descriptions do indeed serve to bring plurality to our attention, and for this reason they are suited to the purpose of social criticism. Particularising descriptions can have a transformative effect on common sense every bit as much as generalising descriptions: we may move up *and* down the scale in order to achieve the desired end. Onora O'Neill makes the point that generalisation is not the only form of abstraction: particularisation is also a variety of abstraction. Abstraction, she points out, simply involves selecting from among the range of possible true things one can might wish to say about a subject.<sup>50</sup> In

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<sup>50</sup> She contrasts this with idealisation: 'Abstraction, taken straightforwardly, is a matter of bracketing, but not of denying, predicates that are true of the matter under discussion.' Idealisation, by contrast, 'is another matter: it can easily lead to falsehood. An assumption, and derivatively a theory, idealises when it ascribes predicates - often seen as enhanced, 'ideal' predicates - that are false of the case in hand, and so denies predicates that are true of that case.' O'Neill, Towards Justice and Virtue, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.39-44.

this sense we abstract as much when we particularise as when we generalise. Another way of making this point would be to say that we contextualise as much when we generalise as when we particularise.

We need not accord ontological primacy to either, but rather should avoid the foundationalism of the socio-historical contextualist and those of the 'Platonist'. For the purposes of social criticism, we need to exploit both styles of contextualisation to effect redescription and transformation: one by pointing out similarities, the other by undermining them. In this way, we do not accord absolute primacy to either identity or difference. As Nelson Goodman points out, these are both 'incomplete' concepts in the sense that things are never simply identical or different to one another, but rather are identical or different in certain respects, which remain to be spelled out.<sup>51</sup> The view of contextualisation set out here will enable us to exploit both possibilities for the purposes of social criticism.

This Chapter has argued against reductive understandings of context which reject generalising abstraction and exclude normative deliberation from the business of interpretation. It has set out an anti-foundationalist conceptual pluralism which refuses to accord any single range of description or standpoint a 'fundamental' status, and it has connected this pluralism to a pragmatic account of interpretation, one which recognises the limited and revisable character of any contextualisation. The goal of such interpretation is that it enables an interpreter to 'go on', to solve the problem at hand, rather than aiming to arrive at a comprehensive or final representation of the object of inquiry. The emphasis on the limited and revisable character of interpretation is significant for the practice of social criticism, which depends entirely upon the possibility of effecting plausible redescriptions of the world.

Subsequent Chapters will apply this account of context and interpretation to existing models of context and of social criticism which will be shown to be disabled by their reductive understandings of context. The next two Chapters will shift the focus of

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<sup>51</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979).

the argument away from the nature of interpretation and onto the problem of what it means to be situated in a context. The conceptual pluralism set out here will be combined with a public account of meaning which will present the conceptual networks we employ in interpretation as socio-historical phenomena. These not only vary from society to society and from age to age but they also serve to constitute the identities and perspectives of interpreters and social critics themselves. To complete the account of interpretation set out here we need to appreciate the ways in which interpretation and social criticism are themselves 'situated' in particular socio-historical contexts, with the consequence that the questions posed by interpreters can themselves be seen as formed by traditions of inquiry.

## CHAPTER THREE

### EPISTEMIC SITUATION

The epistemic conception of what it means to be situated in a context provides a basis for a variety of normative and epistemic claims. First of all, it affirms a pluralist outlook in opposition to a version of 'universalism' which assumes that all persons share a set of foundations from which sound beliefs may be derived. This universalism is disposed to downplay differences in perspective and to accentuate similarities between persons as evidence for there being a universal human nature. The danger of this sort of universalism lies in its tendency to impose a particular perspective, e.g. Western, bourgeois, or masculine as definitive of this 'universal' nature.<sup>1</sup> To insist, therefore, on the connection between perspective and situation is thus to demand, at the very least, an equal hearing for alternative perspectives, inasmuch as it suggests that these cannot be reduced to a unity or simply dismissed when they are shown to be incompatible with whatever set of beliefs have been accorded the status of 'universal'. The normative significance of the attending to situation is that it sustains claims for the recognition of plurality.<sup>2</sup>

The epistemic conception of situation has special features however, which connect ontological, epistemological and normative claims in a problematic fashion. While this conception of situation is widespread, the particular version of it examined here is that found in feminist standpoint theory.<sup>3</sup> This not only asserts the existence of

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<sup>1</sup> On the ideological character of such 'universalism' see Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, p.116.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Charles Taylor, 'The politics of recognition,' in Philosophical Arguments, pp.225-26. See also the overview provided by Elizabeth Kiss, 'Democracy and the politics of recognition,' in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds.) Democracy's Edges, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 193-209.

<sup>3</sup> For influential statements of standpoint theory see Nancy Hartsock, Money, Sex and Power; and Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism, in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (eds.) Discovering Reality, (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983, pp.283-310); Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: what is 'strong objectivity'?'

a plurality of perspectives, but also accords 'epistemic' privilege to certain of these. Central to the epistemic understanding of situation is the idea that experience connects situation and perspective. This works in two ways: firstly, experience is assumed to be transparent, and secondly, individuals have 'privileged' access to it, i.e. others do not have access to it. Different experiences give rise to different beliefs, and these are not criticisable by differently-situated others. The epistemic conception of situation not only emphasises the way that our different situations give rise to a plurality of beliefs, but entails a particularly strong claim for the authoritative character of these beliefs, one that conflicts with the idea that we can possibly understand others better than they can understand themselves. To this extent, this understanding of context is incompatible with social criticism, insofar as it denies that those in 'epistemically' privileged situations could ever have reasons for transforming their beliefs. The criticism of the epistemic conception of situation is therefore a prerequisite for establishing an understanding of context which retains pluralism, but dispenses with ideas about the private and transparent character of experience, which serve to undermine the idea of public deliberation.

The first element of 'epistemic situation' is the idea that each of us is situated in a particular socio-historical context, a particular time and place, in a particular society and in a particular location within that society. There are a plurality of contexts or situations, and our identities as particular persons are constituted by these situations. Even where these identities have a biological aspect, e.g. where they are connected to race or gender, they are nonetheless caught up in a complex of social relations, roles and responsibilities. The second element is the idea of perspective, i.e. the idea that to

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objectivity'?' in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.) *Feminist Epistemologies*, (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.49-82, and Harding, 'Why has the sex/gender system become visible only now?' in Harding and Hintikka (eds.) *Discovering Reality*, pp.311-24. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking Out Again*, (1983) (London: Routledge, 1993). This view is far from universally accepted within feminism, and has come under severe pressure in recent years from feminists who adopt an explicitly anti-essentialist outlook, under the influence of post-structuralism. See Susan Hekman, 'Truth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited,' *Signs* 22 (1997), pp.341-65. Also Seyla Benhabib, 'Sexual differences and collective identities: the new global constellation,' *Signs* 24 (1999), pp.335-61.

this plurality of situations corresponds a plurality of perspectives, or beliefs. Perspectives and situations are connected in such a way that to be situated in a particular context is to have access to its corresponding perspective, available only to persons who share that situation. The connection between situation and perspective, the third element in this complex, is experience. Because it is assumed that one can only have certain experiences if one is situated in a particular context, and that that experience is private, i.e. inaccessible to others, this means that persons situated in different contexts cannot fully adopt my perspective and consequently they can have no basis for criticising it. In this way my beliefs, insofar as they are based on my experience, are authoritative.

This conception of context poses a problem about our capacity to understand those situated in different contexts and about whether it is possible and/or legitimate to seek to revise the beliefs of differently situated others. It is inspired by the epistemological subject insofar as it assumes that understanding is a matter of forming mental representations. The problem of knowledge, on this view, is a problem about forming accurate mental representations of external reality, of having ideas, which represent the world to the subject.<sup>4</sup> While the original problem is one of explaining how our ideas represent the world, this idea of the subject as a mirror of nature comes to govern later ideas about intersubjective understanding too. Accordingly, for Dilthey, understanding others becomes a problem about gaining access to, or at least 'reliving' others' experiences, by means of a process of 'empathetic projection'. Collingwood criticises Dilthey's idea of understanding, on the grounds that we should be unable to know whether our 're-lived' experience was actually that of another, however, he clearly remains as much in the grip of the epistemological notion of understanding as Dilthey. His own solution to this problem is to treat understanding as a matter of re-

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<sup>4</sup> Ideas in the seventeenth century were thought of as images. See Ian Hacking, Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?

enacting others' *thoughts* in one's own mind.<sup>5</sup> Dilthey's view of understanding as centred on the experience of others, a form of understanding particular to the human as opposed to the natural sciences, forms one of the major anti-positivist currents within the social sciences. The idea that understanding might involve the engagement and empathy of the researcher was a direct challenge to the positivist understanding of the social sciences which reigned until the 1960s, an understanding of scientific objectivity which conceived of it as a matter of the detachment and value-freedom.<sup>6</sup> Having said that, both of these views have their origin in a common source: the idea of the epistemological subject. This lies at the base of Dilthey's view that understanding others is a matter of accessing their experiences.

One can adopt both 'individualist' and 'social' versions of epistemic situation, i.e. if one chose to emphasise the way each individual has her own context, a situation occupied solely by her, then one might think of perspectives in an individualist fashion. However, the predominant tendency has been to think of situation in terms of the situation of social groups, chiefly classes, genders and races each with their own perspective. The origins of this view lie in nineteenth century historicism and the historicisation of the absolute view of the world. On this view the absolute view is pieced together over time as each age is superseded by another with a more comprehensive, less limited, picture of reality. On this broadly Hegelian view, the key division is between epochs and their respective *Weltanschauungen*, but with the advent of Marxism this picture is complicated by the introduction of distinct classes within a society, such that each class has a distinct consciousness of its own, and the characteristic outlook of an age is thought to be that of the dominant class.

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<sup>5</sup> His idea is that thoughts, unlike experiences, have the requisite objectivity to enable us to distinguish clearly between our own thoughts and those of others, whereas this could not be the case with subjective experiences. How thoughts are endowed with this objectivity is not explained however. Collingwood, 'Human Nature and Human History,' in *The Idea of History*, pp.205-31.

<sup>6</sup> See William Outhwaite, *Understanding Social Life*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975), Joseph Bleicher, *The Hermeneutic Imagination*, (London: Routledge, 1972), and Zygmunt Bauman, *Hermeneutics and Social Science*, (London: Hutchinson, 1978).

The Hegelian view introduces the element of epistemic privilege into the idea of situated perspectives, as each successive epoch's worldview is thought of as approximating ever closer to the absolute view, such that the worldviews of later eras are supposedly more comprehensive than those of earlier. In Marxism this idea undergoes some alteration, although it is not wholly dispensed with. The goal of world history is not self-consciousness, but the development of the economy to a point at which class divisions are abolished. In Lukács' version of Marxism, the class which will succeed the current ruling class is epistemically privileged in that its ideas are considered superior to those of the class that it will succeed, until, with the demise of capitalism, class-situated consciousness will itself be abolished as the classes in which each perspective are situated will themselves have been abolished.<sup>7</sup> The shift from the focus on perspectives which are more or less comprehensive to a focus on more or less class divided societies, poses a problem about how we are to understand the epistemic privilege of class based views.

This is reflected in the distinction between positive and negative conceptions of 'ideology' within Marxism.<sup>8</sup> Lukács espouses the first of these, the positive view on which each class has its own consciousness or ideology and the superiority of one is simply a matter of its being the ideology of the class which will undermine the dominance of the existing ruling class. This view underlies the sociology of knowledge, which seeks to explain the prevalence and acceptance of certain beliefs in terms of the power and influence of the social groups who hold them.<sup>9</sup> This is a reductive treatment of beliefs which treats 'epistemic' superiority as a function of the power of a given social group to compel acceptance of its perspective.

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<sup>7</sup> Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, (1922) Rodney Livingstone (trans.) (London: Merlin, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> See Jorge Larrain for this characterisation of Marxist views of ideology. Larrain, The Concept of Ideology, (London: Hutchinson, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> See Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, (London: Routledge, 1968) and Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge, (London: Routledge, 1968).



The second view treats 'ideology' in terms of truth and falsity, such that one would distinguish between true beliefs and ideological beliefs. The problem with capitalist ideology is that it is false, i.e. it misrepresents how things are, and the aim of Marxism is to expose the falsity of this view so that the working class might come to see that its interests lie in the overthrow of the capitalist system. On this view the superiority of a perspective is a matter of its being true, and not simply a matter of its social acceptance. The link between perspective and situation is accordingly weaker on this view than it is on the 'positive' conception of ideology, as it presumes that situation is no guarantee that one will hold a single perspective or that this perspective is superior to others. This view of Marxism as social criticism presumes that workers may hold false beliefs which must be challenged and replaced by better, truer beliefs.

### *Feminist Standpoint Theory*

Nancy Hartsock draws explicitly upon Lukács' conception of ideology in order to outline a theory of distinctively gendered perspectives, which she calls feminist standpoint theory. She distinguishes not only between bourgeois and proletarian outlooks, but also between patriarchal and feminist outlooks or 'standpoints':

...like the lives of proletarians according to Marxist theory, womens' lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point that can ground a powerful critique of the phallogentric institutions and ideology that contribute to capitalist forms of patriarchy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power*, (1983) (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985), p.231.

For Hartsock, the two things which do most to structure one's life are the capitalist division of labour and the sexual division of labour: these are the defining features of the social context in which everyone is situated. Of the two, she regards the second as more fundamental, insofar as it has its basis in biological differences.<sup>11</sup> This ontological difference translates into an epistemological hierarchy, for while the point of view of the working class must be superior to that of the bourgeoisie, given women's subordinate position within even this class, it must be the case that their social location endows them with the clearest view of the workings of society.

Women's experience, she argues, is shaped not only by 'women's work', i.e. the cleaning and cooking etc. that are necessary for the smooth operation of capitalist production, but also, crucially, by the experience of reproduction and motherhood. She cites psychoanalytic studies to support her view that this feature of women's experience marks the feminist standpoint as distinct from the masculine inasmuch as it produces a perspective which is not 'dualistic' or 'hierarchical', these being defining characteristics of the male perspective, produced by the struggle of male children to differentiate themselves from their mothers. Women's experience, however, 'leads in the opposite direction - toward opposition of dualisms of any sort; valuation of concrete everyday life; a sense of a variety of connectedness and continuities with other persons and with the natural world.'<sup>12</sup>

Hartsock argues that the concept of 'standpoint' has five features:

1. Material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations.
2. If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent

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<sup>11</sup>She chooses to speak of a sexual division of labour, rather than a gender division of labour, because she believes that 'the division of women and men cannot be reduced to simply social dimensions'. It is vital to 'keep hold of the bodily aspect of existence.' Hartsock, Money, Sex and Power, p.233.

<sup>12</sup> Hartsock, Money, Sex and Power, p.242.

an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse.

3. The vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relation in which all parties are forced to participate and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false.

4. In consequence, the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement that requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate and the education that can only grow from struggle to change those relations.

5. As an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historically liberatory role.<sup>13</sup>

It is possible to show that a specifically feminist standpoint can be elaborated which displays each of these features. Note the claim that one's capacity to understand the world is limited by one's social/biological situation in it. Hartsock not only claims that women, in virtue of their position in the order of things, have a 'deeper and more thoroughgoing' grasp of reality than that available to the capitalist or the worker, but that there also different 'levels of reality' too, in which the 'real material ground of human existence' is not the reality of class society as experienced by the capitalist or the worker, but is that of women, 'a ground constituted by women's experience and life activity.'<sup>14</sup> Thus women do not only understand the world more comprehensively, but there are also aspects of reality which are only available to them.

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<sup>13</sup> Hartsock, Money, Sex and Power, p.232.

<sup>14</sup> Hartsock, Money, Sex and Power, p.10.

Hartsock's view of a feminist standpoint has come in for considerable criticism within feminism itself. Some critics object to the particular understanding of this standpoint which Hartsock elaborates, while others have expressed doubts about standpoint theory *per se*<sup>15</sup>. Criticisms of Hartsock's particular construction of the feminist standpoint mirror the sort to criticisms to which Marxism has been subject, i.e. that it has neglected social cleavages other than class, e.g. race or gender, with the consequence that it cannot explain conflicts and inequalities other than those which can be explained in terms of the division between owners and workers. If Marxists have accorded the category of class a central place in their analyses, then Hartsock appears to have done little more than replace that category with that of gender, generating the same sort of difficulties. Hartsock remarks that she is setting aside differences of race and class in order to concentrate on 'central commonalities across race and class boundaries' but this does not address differences between women in terms of race and class.<sup>16</sup>

Hartsock not only assumes that all women will have the same standpoint but she also makes questionable assumptions about what it is to be a woman. Her (hierarchical and dualist) account of the difference between the masculine and the feminist standpoints centres on the experiences of reproduction and motherhood, producing a distinctively 'maternalist' view of what it is to be woman. This strand of feminism is associated with the idea that women not only have distinct experiences, but also that maternal behaviour embodies a distinct set of values, e.g. care, as opposed to the abstract, masculine value of justice, for example. These maternal values, are said to pose a challenge to 'male' ideas about politics.<sup>17</sup> Many feminists object that this

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<sup>15</sup> Liz Stanley and Sue Wise object to Hartsock's version of standpoint, theory, preferring a more individualist version of it. See Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again. Others, Like Anne Phillips, are careful to point out that they reject the essentialism of standpoint theory. Phillips, The Politics of Presence, p.10.

<sup>16</sup> Hartsock, Money, Sex and Power, p.233.

<sup>17</sup> Mary G. Dietz discusses the 'maternalist' argument that feminist should aim to make politics reflect women's, i.e. maternal values, such as care, instead of masculine concerns with competition, justice etc. 'Context is all: feminism and theories of citizenship,' Daedalus 116 (1987), pp.1-24.

amounts to essentialism, i.e. that it presents a controversial normative claim about what it is to be a woman in the guise of a factual claim about women's experience. By contrast, many feminists take the view that defining women primarily as 'mothers' contributes to gender inequality. What this essentialist claim does is to establish a hierarchy of authenticity within the category of 'woman', such that women who do not accept this model of what it is to be a woman would be regarded as less authentic, as women who are not in touch with those deeper levels of reality which Hartsock claims the experience of motherhood provides one with access to.<sup>18</sup>

While some think that standpoint theory is irredeemably essentialist and must be rejected *tout court*, others have sought to retain the basic idea of standpoint theory: the connection between situation and perspective, but seek to take account of the differences between women in such a way as to recognise a plurality of standpoints, of black or latina women, for example.<sup>19</sup> A pair of British feminist sociologists, Sue Stanley and Liz Wise, take this a step further in apparently refusing to recognise even group standpoints, and adopting a highly individualist version of epistemic situation.<sup>20</sup>

In particular, they espouse a view which rejects the sort of essentialist claims made by Hartsock, and the idea of epistemic hierarchies, grounded in the situations of different groups. They retain the basic idea that situation and perspective are connected

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<sup>18</sup> Seyla Benhabib notes that deconstructive attacks on this sort of essentialist view has led feminists to adopt a certain scepticism about the usefulness of the category of 'woman'. 'Sexual differences and collective identities: the new global constellation,' *Signs* 24 (1999), pp.335-61.

<sup>19</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins for the claim that there is a distinct black women's standpoint. Collins. 'Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited,' *Signs* 22 (1997), pp.375-81. Bat-Ami Bar On argues that standpoint theory leads to a hopeless attempt to construct a hierarchy of oppression in the attempt to order the various standpoints thus established in 'Marginality and Epistemic Privilege' in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.) *Feminist Epistemologies*, pp.83-100. Susan Hekman likewise takes the view that standpoint theory is hopelessly essentialist in 'Truth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited,' *Signs* (1997), pp.341-65.

<sup>20</sup> Sue Stanley and Liz Wise, *Breaking Out*, (1983) Page references are to the second edition: *Breaking Out Again*, (London: Routledge, 1993). Their book precedes the publication of Hartsock's formulation of standpoint theory, but their attacks on Marxist feminism underline the truth of Sandra Harding's observation, that standpoint theory is a basically Marxist idea that was in the air long before Hartsock's book was published. See Harding, 'Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited,' *Signs* 22 (1997), pp. 382-91.

by experience in such a way as to make understanding of others' perspectives impossible, but in such a way as to guarantee the truth of one's own perspective. Where Hartsock relied on a collective subject, Stanley and Wise are individualist, and where Hartsock seeks to order standpoints hierarchically, they are relativist. In some ways this is a more consistent application of the epistemic idea of situation, although it remains deeply problematic.

Just as Skinner and Dunn worried about the abstractness of political thought, and treatments of its history, Stanley and Wise express a concern about the abstractness of theory in general and feminist theory in particular. They counterpose the abstraction and generalisation of theory to the rich particularity of social reality and its 'lived experience'.<sup>21</sup> Their concern, however, is not only with the apparent unreality of theory, but also with the authority of theory and theorists to interpret the world, to speak about the experiences of women, and to speak for the women themselves. Feminist theory has been guilty of usurping the authority of individual women over their own experiences, to the extent that it has questioned the 'validity' of these experiences, i.e. the authority with which women speak about them:

Generalised thinking, we believe, leads to women's accounts of our lives being downgraded, and us being told we're wrong or falsely conscious. In other words, if the facts of experience don't fit theoretical knowledge then these can't be facts at all.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Feminist theory is condemned as 'abstract, generalised, 'objectified' theory which bears little relationship to anything very real. It is concerned with abstract ideas abstractly related and standing on behalf of lived experiences'. Stanley and Wise, *Breaking Out Again*, p.90. This does not prevent Stanley and Wise from laying claim to the authority of theory inasmuch as they assert that 'we are all of us 'theoreticians' because we all of us use our values and beliefs to interpret and construct the world.' Stanley and Wise, *Breaking Out Again*, p.64.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley and Wise, *Breaking Out Again*, p.77.

What is at stake is the authority of the individual as an interpreter of her own experience, and Stanley and Wise fear that feminist theory, in virtue of its preference for abstraction, simply denies this.

The authority of the individual woman is copperfastened by the assumption that experience is, strictly speaking, not interpreted at all, by anyone, but is rather *direct*, providing unmediated access to 'reality'. This view is familiar from the previous chapter: raw experience can act as a foundation for knowledge to the extent that it delivers up the world as it really is. Experience, of course, is not only direct, but also private: we cannot have each others' experiences, so that while we have direct 'access' to our own experiences, we can only have access to those of others, second hand, by means of their reports upon it. This view of our relation to the world, the view of classical epistemology, is also central to Stanley and Wise's account: 'none of us can ever convey to other people exactly what is in our minds, nor convey exactly what our feelings consist of and feel like.'<sup>23</sup> They go on to suggest that while we may pretend there is such a thing as 'intersubjectivity', this is really just pieced together out of our several private representations of the world.<sup>24</sup>

This view is sometimes taken to underwrite the idea that the experiences of members of certain social groups are inaccessible to members of other social groups, while shared within the group concerned. This view animates Nancy Hartsock's version of feminist standpoint theory. Stanley and Wise themselves refer to 'women's perspective, women's knowledge, and women's experience', as if they too subscribed to this social version of epistemic situation.<sup>25</sup> There are problems with this view even from the point of view of the epistemological perspective, for if experience is indeed private in the way outlined above then the experience of individual women will be just

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.11-12.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.11-12.

<sup>25</sup> These are said to provide an 'irrefutable critique' of the claims of social science to be 'objective'. Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.163. They also claim that 'feminist consciousness' makes available to us a previously untapped store of knowledge about what it is to be a woman. Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.120.

as inaccessible to other women as it is to men. We may conjecture that women have the same experiences, but we cannot say for sure, as we are unable to compare experiences. Equally, if one were to abandon the claim that individuals have a privileged access to their own mental representations in order to overcome this hurdle, then one faces the problem of explaining how experience could be accessible to one set of people and not to another. The nub of the problem is the question of access, and not, it should be said, the idea that different groups of people may have different experiences, and that they may interpret the world in particular ways. Stanley and Wise, ultimately come down on the side of the individual: their aim, after all, is to deny the authority of feminist theorists over the experience of other women. They object to the idea that feminists have any access to the experience of other women, let alone that they are in a position to form better founded views on it than the objects of their research: 'feminist consciousness is specific and unique to each feminist.'<sup>26</sup>

Stanley and Wise go on to embrace a far reaching relativism, in which not only is it the case that experiences differ from one person to another, but truth and reality are also variable in this way. They are influenced in this by the general turn against positivism in the social sciences, and they express this in terms of opposition to the idea of an objective reality *per se* and not simply in their opposition to the idea of there being a single right way to represent it. From the idea that there is no way for us to know whether another's representation of the world are identical with ours, they move to the idea that each of us experiences our own reality too and that, given that we experience it directly, our experience of it is absolutely authoritative: 'what feminism does is point out that this one 'real' reality isn't the one, real reality at all. It says that

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<sup>26</sup> Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.133. They object to researchers writing 'about the experiences of others as though they were directly available to them.' Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.165.



the 'objective' reality is subjective and it is merely one reality which coexists with many others.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, Stanley and Wise also want to hold onto the idea that we ought to respect other's experiences as absolutely valid, for them at least, if not for us. What this entails is that we ought not question others' reports of their experiences, as they are the only ones in a position to say whether these are accurate or not. However, there is a gap between accepting the privacy of experience and accepting the validity of reports upon it: given the former, it must be the case that we cannot ever have access to their experiences, and consequently should not be in a position to judge whether or not their reports are accurate. Privacy entails inexpressibility: if we could make our experiences transparent to others by means of language, then we could not be said to have privileged access to it.

Their objections to the 'imperialism' of feminist theory are evidently as much moral as they are epistemological, for the epistemological arguments clearly will not underwrite the idea that we have to respect others' reports of their experiences. This respect must be regarded as a moral principle rather than a conceptual necessity, especially as the relativism they espouse would seem to leave individuals free to take other's statements any way they please.<sup>28</sup> Those feminists who would claim to speak for all women are criticised not only for mistakenly thinking they can have access to the experiences of other persons, but also for violating the egalitarian tenets of feminism, which requires, they say, 'an acceptance of the validity of all women's experiences.'<sup>29</sup> This will be the case even where, as a feminist, one might want to say that a woman is misinterpreting her situation:

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<sup>27</sup> Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.134. With respect to truth, they say: 'we also believe that there are many (often competing) versions of the truth. Which, if any, is 'the' truth is irrelevant. And if such a thing as 'truth' exists, this is undemonstrable.' p.113.

<sup>28</sup> 'We see that positivist reality is invalid - but only for us.' Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.113.

<sup>29</sup> Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.102. Elsewhere they say that 'Feminism insisted that personal experiences couldn't be invalidated or rejected, because if something was felt then it was felt,

If a housebound, depressed mother of six with an errant spouse says she's not oppressed, there's little point in us telling her she's got it wrong because of the objective reality of her situation...what she sees as the facts of her life is the *truth* for her as much as any alternative account is truth for the onlooker.

They conclude that to disagree with womens' assessments of their situations would simply amount to 'attempting to impose our reality on them when they don't want us to.'<sup>30</sup>

Sandra Harding's version of feminist standpoint theory tries to circumvent the difficulties present in Hartsock's position by weakening the link between situation and perspective rather than by multiplying situations and perspectives. Like Hartsock, she believes that,

One's social situation enables and sets limits on what we can know; some social situations - critically unexamined dominant ones - are more limiting than others in this respect and what makes these situations more limiting is their inability to generate the most critical questions about received belief.<sup>31</sup>

If we adopt the standpoint of the dominant group we will be unable to see certain problems, problems which are all too apparent from the point of view of the most

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and if it was felt then it was absolutely real for the woman feeling and experiencing it.' Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.63.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.117.

<sup>31</sup> Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: what is 'strong objectivity'?' in Alcoff and Potter (eds.) Feminist Epistemologies, pp.99-82

marginalised groups in society. These viewpoints are epistemically privileged because they have a more comprehensive view than is afforded by other situations. This means that while members of marginal groups can understand the limited perspective of the dominant groups, the converse is not true.

Despite this talk of epistemic limits and their connection to particular social locations, Harding's view differs significantly from Hartsock's in certain respects. Firstly, there is no claim to the effect that different levels of reality correspond to the different standpoints. She also acknowledges that 'women' is a general category and that different women have different standpoints. More importantly, she does not make the sort of strong claims about the connection between biology and experience that characterised Hartsock's understanding of situation. If anything, Harding seems to empty the idea of epistemic limits of its content by presenting the difference between the standpoints of dominant and marginal groups as the difference between 'better' and 'worse' 'starting points' for research. The lives and experiences of women are not philosophical foundations she argues, but are rather 'the site, the activities from which scientific questions arise.'<sup>32</sup> These experiences are inaccessible, it seems, to those in different social locations, as 'the activities of those at the bottom of ... social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought - for everyone's research and scholarship...'<sup>33</sup> The suggestion seems to be that we are not bound to regard these perspectives as authoritative, although we are bound to engage with them.

Harding goes on to argue that her view does not entail relativism: her claim is not that the viewpoints of the marginalised are more true, or that they access another, deeper, level of reality, but only that they provide better starting points for research. Nor is her view to be understood as a version of ethnocentrism. Harding's does not claim that one's own view is necessarily the best or only view from which to construct one's research agenda. This could only be the case if one belonged to a marginalised

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<sup>32</sup> Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology', p.54.

<sup>33</sup> Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology', p.54.

group oneself, and this view would be a good starting point for research not because it is one's own, but only because it is the viewpoint of a socially marginal group. She is not a critic of the idea of objectivity, she argues, as she presents her account of feminist standpoint(s) as one which will contribute to greater objectivity than will be found in research projects constructed from the point of view of dominant groups. She is offering both a methodological rule (start from the standpoint of the marginalised) and a conception of objectivity which appeals not to value neutrality but rather to the value of equality and by implication it would appear, to the value of impartiality. By formulating research problems from the standpoint of marginal groups one hopes to avoid biases, ways of posing problems which shape research projects conceived from the point of view of dominant groups. The aim is to acknowledge that there may be more than one way of posing questions and that given the dominance of certain social groups, certain perspectives may be persistently overlooked. Loyalty to any particular standpoint, even to the standpoint of the marginalised, is however, to be rejected, as this could only result in 'partial and distorted results'.<sup>34</sup> On her view there is a direct link between epistemological and ethical questions: 'Democracy-advancing views have systematically generated less partial and distorted beliefs than others.'<sup>35</sup>

There seems to be little left here of the idea that a standpoint rooted in the particular experiences of members of particular social groups will be inaccessible to others. In Harding's version of standpoint theory there is no suggestion that only the marginalised themselves can truly understand their own standpoint. On the contrary, Harding argues that everyone, including members of dominant groups, can and must formulate research projects which try to address problems defined as such from the point of view of the marginalised. This would make little sense if these standpoints were 'inaccessible' to 'outsiders'. What then are the status of the limits which she refers to when speaking of the standpoint of the dominant group and what is the nature of the

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<sup>34</sup> Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology', p.72.

<sup>35</sup> Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology', p.71.

superiority of the standpoints of the marginalised? If these 'limits' do not prevent members of either group from understanding the points of view of the other, the links between situation and perspective seem to have been broken, in the sense that there is no longer supposed to be a necessary link between the two. There are different perspectives and different situations, but one's situation does not limit one to a particular perspective. This view would allow for the possibility that not only might a member of a dominant social group adopt the perspective of a member of a marginalised group, but also the converse: that members of marginalised groups might also adopt the perspective of the dominant group, i.e. that they might be said to misinterpret their situation in certain ways, an idea present in Marxism, but absent from standpoint theory.

The limits would appear to be less epistemological - they are not imposed by the privacy of experience - than moral. That is to say, the point of view of the dominant group is limited in the sense that it is not impartial. Members of this group will tend not to consider how the less powerful view the world. The possibility that this might also be true of members of marginalised groups appears to be implicitly recognised by Harding's treatment of the views of people in these situations as 'starting points' for research and not simply as authoritative as they are for Hartsock, or for Stanley and Wise. The suggestion that the perspectives of the oppressed offer epistemically superior starting points for research amounts to little more than the claim that the best interpretations will be those which take the plurality of perspectives present in society into account. Harding's theory appears to retain little of what made standpoint theory distinctive: the idea that there was a necessary link between a particular situation and a particular perspective, such that to occupy that situation entailed adoption of that perspective; the idea that one could not understand a perspective unless one occupied the relevant situation; and the idea that situated perspectives were epistemically privileged, which is to say that the truth of perspective was guaranteed by the situation of the person holding it.

These views rest on certain problematic assumptions about the transparency and privacy of experience which are characteristic of classical epistemology. They exploit the idea of experience not only in order to argue that perspectives will vary with social situation but also to claim a certain authority, or privilege for these perspectives. This has not only epistemic, but also normative aspects, such that respecting persons becomes identified with respecting their beliefs. These ideas are reflected in different ways in each of the versions of standpoint theory considered here. In Hartsock's version we are presented with the strongest claim: that a particular situation in the social order enables those who occupy that situation to form 'epistemically privileged', or more comprehensive, beliefs about society at large than can be formed by those who occupy other situations. In Stanley and Wise's version, the idea of privilege is restricted to the individual's self-understanding: we cannot access the experiences of differently situated others so we cannot challenge their self-understandings. In Harding's version only the rhetoric of limits and 'access' remains, for she simply argues that comprehensive views of society cannot be formed unless they take the various beliefs of those situated within it into account.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the fact that standpoint theory has its origins in Marxism and is presented by Hartsock as continuous with the 'emancipatory' aims of that tradition, standpoint theory constitutes a significant departure from the Marxist tradition on account of the way it treats experience as authoritative. This gives rise to a politics of recognition rather than a politics of transformation. The latter depends on the idea that perspectives are criticisable and that social critics can provide their audience with reasons to transform their beliefs, even those concerning their understanding of themselves. The former view, by contrast, on account of its understanding of the link

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<sup>36</sup> Harding affirms her commitment to standpoint orthodoxy, but reduces the idea of epistemic privilege to the bare and unexceptionable idea that 'that some discursive accounts provide richer resources than others for understanding natural and social worlds - that they are epistemically privileged in this sense - I did argue for as has every other standpoint theorist.' The idea that some understandings of the world are better than others is unproblematic: what distinguishes standpoint theory is the substitution of sociological for epistemic criteria to distinguish between better and worse understandings. Harding, 'Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited,' *Signs* 22 (1997), pp.383-91 (p.388).

between experience and belief, rests on the view that this is not possible. At the very least, we cannot access the perspectives of differently situated others, let alone challenge them.

Without the idea of transformation, it is hard to see how standpoint theory, or any other view resting on an epistemic understanding of situation can be deemed 'emancipatory'. Marxism rests on a much weaker notion of the link between situation and perspective, such that occupying a particular class position is no guarantee that one will understand one's interests as a member of that class. Indeed, given the control of the dominant class over the means of ideological production, it is eminently likely that one will fail to recognise one's interests. Marxism accords no privilege to experience. The task of the Marxist social critic is to provide an understanding of society which will reveal to the working class its true interests and in this way aid it in coming to self-consciousness; in becoming not only a class in itself but also for itself.

It is not difficult to see how this model of criticism can be taken over by feminists to criticise oppressive understandings of gender relations and gender identities. It *is* difficult to see how standpoint theory can fulfil this role, however, for it denies the premise on which these emancipatory models of social criticism rest: the idea that people can misunderstand themselves and their interests - something which is not merely a random occurrence - but can itself be explained in terms of an analysis of the power relations pertaining in society. From the point of view of a Marxist, or non-standpoint feminist social criticism, standpoint theory risks endorsing the oppressive self-understandings produced by a society marked by gender inequality. The matriarchalism of Hartsock's account of the feminist standpoint could be regarded as itself an ideological distortion. There is, then, a fundamental conflict between an emancipatory politics which seeks to transform people's self-understandings and a politics of recognition which makes overly strong claims for the authority of these understandings.

The previous chapter suggests that no interpretation, whether 'grounded' in personal experience or otherwise, can claim to be absolute, or final. To suppose that

self-understandings could be guaranteed in some way by experience is to suppose that experience can be demonstrated to represent the world as it is in itself, in some way that other categories, e.g. those of 'abstract theory' do not, a claim that is inevitably circular. Self-interpretations are not more final or authoritative than interpretations of anything else. What I want to do next is to challenge the idea that self-understandings are 'privileged' in the sense that an understanding of oneself and one's experiences is conceptually distinct, or 'privileged' in the sense that an understanding of others is not. I will set out a social, rule-based conception of meaning which places self-understanding on the same level as understanding others, thus dismissing the problem of the accessibility of others' perspectives set up by the epistemic conception of situation. This account will form a key element of the hermeneutic account of situation which will be outlined in the next chapter.

### *Meaning: public or private?*

If meaning turns out to be public rather than private, then the idea that situation in different contexts entails barriers to communication will have to be rejected. The epistemic model has fostered the belief that language is essentially private and that our public language is a patchwork constructed from these idiolects. This is because on this view, words have meaning in virtue of their referring to our private mental representations. Our public language rests rather precariously on *regulative* conventions which serve to coordinate our uses of *already* meaningful signs. Hobbes, for example, expresses this view as follows: 'The general use of Speech is to transferre our Mental Discourse, into Verbal; or the Trayne of our Thoughts into the Trayne of Words...'<sup>37</sup> The alternative, Wittgensteinian, view I will outline here, while not denying that there is 'Mental Discourse', reverses its position,

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<sup>37</sup> Hobbes, Chap.IV, 'Of Speech', *Leviathan*, (1651) C. B. Macpherson (ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.101.



making it derivative from the public uses of language which serve to constitute the meaning of words.

The basic difficulty with the epistemic model of meaning is that it cannot show how mutual understanding is possible. It has been pointed out that this model did not originate as an attempt to account for language or intersubjectivity: the seventeenth century 'way of ideas' was concerned primarily with the relation of mind to world and not with the relation of mind to mind.<sup>38</sup> To the extent that questions of intersubjectivity arose at all, it was in the form of remarks on the need for regulations governing public language as in Hobbes, or as the problem of knowledge of other minds, that is, how to have knowledge of others as subjects and not simply objects of experience. These questions are of course posed from within the epistemological tradition, when an adequate account of understanding requires that we step outside the confines of that tradition. Misconceptions about understanding which stem from this picture remain, however, extremely influential even today, and not simply in philosophical circles.

The shortcomings of this view of meaning become apparent when we turn to understanding, for it effectively renders understanding logically impossible.<sup>39</sup> If words are meaningful in virtue of their representing ideas, mental representations to which a subject has privileged access, then no one could ever establish what another meant by what he or she said. This is because the knowledge of what would serve to determine the meaning of that person's utterances would be denied them. An individual, it seems, could mean whatever he or she liked by an expression, as its meaning would derive solely from that person's idiosyncratic association between the sign and the idea before his or her mind.

Communication could only be possible to the extent that agreement can be reached concerning the use of words, but this cannot surmount the problem, for understanding could only be truly said to be achieved if one could know that another

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<sup>38</sup> Ian Hacking, Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?

<sup>39</sup> Ryle, The Concept of Mind, (1949) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.51.

had the same ideas before his mind as oneself, and this, of course, is denied, for one can only be certain of one's own mental representations. The conventions themselves provide no solid foundation for meaning, for how could one be sure that all had agreed to use the signs in the same way? Here 'the same way' refers not to a public practice, but to a private association between signs and mental images. There are in effect, no criteria by which to judge whether a sign has been used correctly or not. I could mean whatever I liked by a sign, depending on the image I had before my mind whenever I used it. There would not even be any need for me to maintain any regularity in the associations I made. This is remarkably like Humpty Dumpty's view that he could simply *decide* the meaning of his utterances. This view cannot account for intersubjective understanding, and on account of its epistemological bias it is led to confuse understanding with access to another's consciousness, which is to say, to confuse it with having another's experiences.

Ryle captures the difference between this view of understanding, and the Wittgensteinian view in terms of a contrast between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', i.e. between a *propositional* (representational) view and a *practical* view, in which understanding is taken to be a matter of acquiring a mastery of a technique. Understanding, Ryle contends, depends upon the existence of those customs or practices which provide a background for both following rules and identifying those rules which our interlocutors are following. This requires, not knowledge *that* another has such and such an image before her mind when she says 'x', but rather knowledge of *how* to play the game concerned, for one could not identify a particular move, if one has not oneself learned what the game consists in. Ryle asks us to consider someone watching the people moving wooden figures around a chequered board, and argues that only if the spectator has knowledge of 'how' to play chess, will he be in a position to identify this situation as an instance of chess playing.

Wittgenstein famously introduces the concept of a 'language game' to express the idea that a language consists of a multiplicity of uses of words and expressions.<sup>40</sup> This captures two important ideas. Firstly, the idea that the use of a word resembles making a move in a game captures the idea that language use is an *activity*. This serves to reorientate our conception of the subject from that of classical epistemology: the knowing subject, to a conception of the subject as primarily an agent, and from the idea that language represents the world to the idea that it is a tool used within it. Secondly, that the action of using an expression must be related to a background of institutionalised practices, i.e. the rules of the game: we can make no sense of the idea of 'making a move' without reference to these rules. These rules are, to use Searle's terms, *constitutive* as opposed to merely *regulative*, for in their absence there would be no game at all. Words could not be said to have a meaning at all: the conditions for their identification would be absent.<sup>41</sup> For example, in the absence of the relevant rules we could not speak of moving wooden figures on a chequered board as 'chess'. These constitutive regularities mark the dividing line between meaningful utterances and a random collection of sounds and figures: meaning requires a certain stability in the use of expressions.

It is not enough, of course, that there should exist regularities in our production of signs, these 'rules' must function as *criteria* for the application of signs in particular contexts, i.e. they exercise normative constraints upon the use of language. As Peter Winch has pointed out, the concept of a rule is inseparable from the possibility of making a mistake. For there to be rule following in Wittgenstein's sense there must be the possibility of an external check upon one's use of a term.<sup>42</sup> This emphasises the way

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<sup>40</sup> 'I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language game.' Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §7, p.50.

<sup>41</sup> 'As a start, we might say that regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behaviour; for example, many rules of etiquette regulate inter-personal relationships which exist independently of the rules. But constitutive rules do not merely regulate, they create or define new forms of behaviour. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of playing such games.' Searle, Speech Acts. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.33.

<sup>42</sup> Winch, The Idea of a Social Science, (London: Routledge, 1958), p.82.

in which rules exercise normative constraints upon the participants in a language: correct or incorrect uses of language may be determined with reference to them. If this were not possible, meaning itself would be impossible, for no stability in use could be ensured. There could be no talk of correct, or incorrect uses of a term.

Talk of language users following rules is not to be confused with any conception of these rules as mere inductive generalisations about the occurrence of signs in particular contexts, for these rules are *criteria*, not the basis of hypotheses.<sup>43</sup> Equally, to say that a language user is engaging in a rule-governed practice is not to say that her use of signs is determined by causal laws of some sort, only that she is *guided* by these rules, and that we ascribe meaning to her utterances to the extent that we can regard her behaviour as an instance of rule-following.

Language is made up of a *multiplicity* of these language games, each with its own rules and purpose.<sup>44</sup> It is of some importance that the same word or expression may appear in the context of a number of different language games. The meaning or identity of a word or expression is governed by the rule governed context in which it appears and consequently the same sign may have multiple meanings no one of which

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<sup>43</sup> See Baker and Hacker, Wittgenstein: rules, grammar and necessity. An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp.109.

<sup>44</sup>...Here the term 'language game is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples and in others:

- Giving orders, and obeying them-
- Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements-
- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)-
- Reporting an event-
- Speculating about an event-
- Forming and testing a hypothesis-
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams-
- Making up a story; and reading it-
- Play-acting-
- Singing catches-
- Guessing riddles-
- Making a joke; telling it-
- Solving a problem in practical arithmetic-
- Translating from one language into another-
- Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying!...

Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §23, pp.11-12.

can strictly be said to be its 'real' meaning. A word is meaningful to the extent that it has a use within a language game, which is to say that it has a meaning insofar as there is a practice or custom of applying it in a certain way. Meaning is constituted by the existence of practices of rule-following, - applying rules for the use of words.<sup>45</sup>

By insisting not only on the plurality of these language games, but also on the fact that they are not reducible to some more basic game, such as that of representing, or making statements, Wittgenstein contributed to the abandonment of earlier reductionist conceptions of analysis such as those of Russell, the Logical Positivists or indeed, his own earlier conception.<sup>46</sup> Instead of seeking to analyse language into its constituent elements, which as 'basic propositions', for example, were conceived as representative of the world, whether of its logical structure or material nature, analysis could now only be conceived in terms of a mapping of the criss-crossing uses of language games in which no one game may serve as a foundation for any of the others.<sup>47</sup>

One of the most significant features of this new picture of language is that it treats language as *primarily* public, rather than *derivatively* so. How are we to understand the idea of public, meaning-constituting, rules? We will need to distinguish between the 'social' and the 'public'. To understand a language is, as Wittgenstein insists, to have the 'mastery of a technique'.<sup>48</sup> One must be trained in the use of words before he can recognise others' use of them. Understanding does not require knowledge of another's mental processes or even that we produce hypotheses about

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<sup>45</sup> 'For a large class of cases-though not for all- in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in language. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §43, p.20.

<sup>46</sup> That is to say, the conception of analysis advanced in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, C. K. Ogden (trans.) (London: Kegan Paul, 1922).

<sup>47</sup> Strawson, Analysis and Metaphysics, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). J. O. Urmson, Philosophical Analysis.

<sup>48</sup> '...To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.' Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §199, p. 81.

these by analogy with our own (how should we identify these?), it simply requires that we recognise the rules they are following in speaking as they do.

In Wittgenstein's own discussion, he makes this point by asking us to consider a situation in which another is being taught to apply a rule, e.g. to continue an arithmetic series, for example, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10. This person is said to understand, when he can continue the series (and not simply on one occasion, but 'often') that is, when he has mastered the technique involved, and knows, 'how to go on'. To understand is not merely to learn by rote, but to acquire a *skill*, enabling us to apply the rule in new contexts. The concept of understanding is severed from its connection with ghostly mental processes, and is applied rather to the 'circumstances' surrounding an utterance. We understand others by identifying their moves against a background of rule-following. Others attribute understanding to us on the basis of our showing evidence that we have mastered the relevant technique.

Understanding, then, relies upon the existence of public criteria embodied in practices which permit the attribution of meaning and utterances. All can judge whether a given use conforms or deviates from a given practice. The Cartesian view clearly lacks the necessary public criteria to sustain understanding. Wittgenstein warns us against thinking of understanding in terms of mental processes, although he does not deny that we often have mental images accompanying our uses of language. To think of understanding in this way would be to lose sight of the fact that without the public criteria supplied by a background of practices, there could be no understanding, for in their absence, there would be no way to distinguish between one use of a sign and another.

Much of the recent interest in this aspect of Wittgenstein's view has been stimulated by Saul Kripke's discussion of it.<sup>49</sup> There is no need to engage with Kripke's argument in its entirety, only that part of it which most closely bears on the

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<sup>49</sup> Kripke, Wittgenstein: on rules and private language, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

issue to hand.<sup>50</sup> Kripke argues that Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following is effectively a 'sceptical solution' to a 'sceptical problem' he says is posed and from which the private language argument follows as a corollary.<sup>51</sup> In this passage Wittgenstein appears to pose the problem of the foundation of rule following:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action could be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if anything can be made out to accord with a rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here...<sup>52</sup>

The whole point of appealing to rules is to provide some standard of correctness for the use and identification of signs. If, however, anything can be made to accord with a rule, even, a rule such as 'never use a sign in the same way twice', then this standard of correctness disappears. Wittgenstein's response is to argue that 'real' rule-following, as it were, is grounded in actual practices:

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us for a moment, until we thought of yet another one standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is

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<sup>50</sup> I agree, for example, that the generalised scepticism of Kripke's 'sceptic' is unlikely to be satisfied by an appeal to what a community does. See. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, (London: Routledge, 1976) and Simon Blackburn, 'The individual strikes back,' *Synthese* 58 (1984), pp.281-301.

<sup>51</sup> This reading of Wittgenstein has provoked sharp rejoinders from Anscombe and Baker and Hacker, who deny that Wittgenstein was concerned with sceptical problems at all. Kripke, it should be noted, prefaces his book by insisting that we should read it not as an exposition of Wittgenstein, but rather of Wittgenstein's argument as it struck Kripke.

<sup>52</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §201, p.81.

exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases.<sup>53</sup>

Kripke's question is 'what justifies us in saying that we mean 'x' whenever we use a sign, as opposed to 'y' or 'z' etc.? His sceptic alleges that no fact about me, whether about my mind, or even about my past usage of a term, could provide such a justification.<sup>54</sup> The sceptical solution to this problem involves admitting that the sceptic is right: there is no such fact about *me* which will serve to justify the attribution of meaning to one's utterances. The solution lies in an appeal to a community's practice of using a sign in a given way, i.e. an appeal not to a fact about the speaker, but rather to a fact about the linguistic community to which he belongs. We are only warranted in our attributions of meaning when such a practice exists: only the fact that there is such a practice, that a sign has a role in our lives, warrants such attributions, for outside such a community there exist no 'justification conditions' for such attributions.<sup>55</sup> As has been suggested above, meaning depends on the existence of public justification conditions, Kripke's conclusion, however, appears rather startling: the sceptical solution 'does not allow us to speak of a single individual considered by himself and in isolation, as ever meaning anything.'<sup>56</sup>

This claim clearly requires some explanation. We should not wish to say, for example, that an individual who happened to be the last surviving member of some tribe from the Amazon basin and the only person extant who spoke that tribe's language, was not speaking meaningfully, simply on account of the absence of a linguistic community who could understand these utterances. Another, more serious objection to this view is that there is nothing essentially 'social' about the idea of a

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<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §201, p.81.

<sup>54</sup> It may provide the basis for an inductive generalisation, but not for a justification. Kripke, Wittgenstein: on rules and private language, p.58.

<sup>55</sup> Kripke, Wittgenstein: on rules and private language, p.89.

<sup>56</sup> Kripke, Wittgenstein: on rules and private language, pp.68-9.



practice.<sup>57</sup> All that is required for a speaker to use a term meaningfully is that he do so in the context of a practice. This practice may be of his own devising, for all that is required is that his use of a given sign exhibit regularity, and that it exercise a normative constraint upon his actions. Such an individual could explain and evaluate any particular performance against the background of his practice. Of course, most practices preexist us, and are learned from an existing community of practitioners, as part of the process of initiation into that community. Furthermore, the technique of generating one's own practices is presumably dependent on one's having already learned a language. However it does not seem impossible to conceive of someone generating their own practice in this way.<sup>58</sup> If it makes sense to conceive of an individual generating his or her own practices, then we can surely speak of that individual's utterances having a private meaning, constituted by their place within these practices.<sup>59</sup>

It is necessary to determine how we are to take the private language argument, before we can consider the points above. The private language argument follows from the treatment of meaning and understanding in terms of rule following, because no rule-following behaviour is *in principle* private. In other words, there can be no private rule following in the sense that it is inseparable from the concept of a rule that it be

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<sup>57</sup> Baker and Hacker, Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) pp.170.

<sup>58</sup> See Fogelin's view that mastery of a technique requires training, and we cannot conceive of training without reference to a social situation. Even if one were to maintain that mastery of a particular technique is separable from training (which itself must require a trainer and a trainee) one might object to the idea of a self generated practice on the grounds that one would already have had to have learned what it is to master a technique before one could go on to generate techniques of one's own. Thus my capacity to generate my own practices would itself have derived from my having been taught to follow shared practices. Fogelin, Wittgenstein. It is, incidentally, a commonplace of sociology textbooks to begin discussions of socialisation with reference to discoveries of feral children, who appear not to have generated languages of their own, although they exhibit a limited capacity to learn natural languages. See A. Giddens, Sociology. (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

<sup>59</sup> Finally, there is the objection that to propose the agreement of a particular community as a justification condition for the use of sign is to slip back into the mistaken view that rule-following is simply a matter of statistical regularity, for it is no justification of what one does to say that 'this is what we do'. Kripke's solution does not appear to recognise that rules must impose constraints upon communities and not simply individual speakers, i.e. or concept of a rule permits us to speak of communities going against them. See Baker and Hacker, Rules, Grammar and Necessity, p.172.

capable of being taught to another. The private language argument is directed, then, against the epistemic view that language is built upon our privileged access to our mental representations.<sup>60</sup> There can be no language which does not rely upon rule-following, for there is no other way of fixing the identity of signs, and no rule-following is in principle private.

This does not imply that there cannot be instances of isolated individuals following rules, even rules of their own devising, provided these rules could be taught to another. The mere *isolation* of individuals is not to be confused with privacy in this sense, and the presence or absence of a community who share a particular practice of using a sign in a particular way is not a condition of meaningfulness. One can speak meaningfully even where there is no audience or one's audience fail to grasp what one is saying, as for example if one were to speak French to an exclusively Anglophone audience. This of course still relies upon the existence somewhere, or at some time, of a community from which one has learned one's mastery of a language. What of the idea that individuals can generate their own practices? This is simply to show that language may be *contingently* 'private', but not that it could be private in principle.<sup>61</sup> It seems then that one could generate one's own language. However, it is clear that to be understood, one must train others in one's techniques, and once others have been so trained, understanding is simply a matter of identifying signs against a background of what are now public criteria.<sup>62</sup> Any natural language is obviously public in the strong sense that its practices are in fact shared, and not only in the sense that they are

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<sup>60</sup> 'The essential thing about private experience is not really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people also have *this* or something else. The assumption would thus be possible -though unverifiable- that one section of mankind has one sensation of red and another section another.' Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §272, p. 95.

<sup>61</sup> Baker and Hacker are not, of course, arguing for the possibility of a private language.

<sup>62</sup> In defence of Kripke, one might note that his argument concerned ascriptions of meaning to others. Clearly this involves reference to some shared practice, even one which is no longer extant (one which has been learned by an archaeologist for example). He does not deny that Robinson Crusoe can be said to speak meaningfully, for example, but only points out that we attribute meaning to his utterances on the basis of our practices. We might want to say here however, that we could also attribute meaning to his utterances on the basis of our having learned *his* practices.

sharable, and the possibility of a self-generated practice, does not, I think, pose any serious objection to the suggestion that language is social.

This public view of meaning disposes of the idea that something could be meaningful for an individual, or even for a group, and yet incommunicable, a view characteristic of standpoint theory. If this is so, then the idea that we are incomprehensible to each other on account of being situated in different contexts is untenable, as is the idea that my self-understandings are authoritative and immune to criticism because they rely upon essentially private meanings. This does not mean that in practice communication will necessarily be straightforward. First of all, this view of language as public adds another dimension to the conceptual pluralism set out in the previous chapter, insofar as it suggests that different groups of people may come to develop different practices, using words in ways that we may find unfamiliar, and incorporating them into language games other than those we know how to play. This may not only give rise to misunderstandings, but also to the more perplexing problem of essential contestability. Related to this is the problem of ambiguity. In virtue of their public, practice-constituted character, utterances will carry meanings which a speaker did not, or could not have foreseen or controlled. If one thinks of meaning as essentially private, as Skinner does, for example, one can dismiss this phenomenon as secondary: as a matter of mistakes about the true meaning of an utterance by an inept audience, but the very fact that such mistakes can happen at all suggests that this is rather an essential feature of public language: a consequence of the fact that meaning does not originate with individual speakers.<sup>63</sup>

While this view of meaning does not purport to guarantee transparent communication, this is very different from the claim that meaning is incommunicable because it is private. Understanding may be difficult to achieve because of the inevitable plurality of meanings, but it is, in principle, possible. The loss of privilege with respect to our self understanding, which this view entails, also implies, however,

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<sup>63</sup> The way in which meaning is not determined by authorial intention is insisted upon by Derrida in his *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

that dialogue with others may enrich that understanding, a possibility overlooked by those who view meaning as private. This model of meaning underwrites the suggestion made in the previous chapter that social criticism should focus on traditions, ideologies or discourses, i.e. on systematic, institutionalised clusters of ideas or problematics. On this view, language can be interpreted as a social institution, an institution into which we are socialised, particular languages having their own features, and their own history. This raises the possibility that a narrative about the development and uses of a set of ideas can bring to light features of our conceptual framework which escape our theoretical understanding. Where meaning is constituted by social, historical uses, we can employ concepts without all of their features being transparent to us. The possibility of social criticism rests on this lack of transparency.

### *The Politics of Epistemic Situation*

The significance of standpoint theory is that it opposes the sort of 'universalism' that refuses to recognise that people have distinct experiences and that this gives rise to different ways of looking at the world. What is wrong with standpoint theory is the particular way that it conceives of the relationship between identity, experience, and perspective, which gives rise to unacceptable claims about epistemic authority, self-transparency and communicability. These ideas have fairly clear political implications although standpoint theorists themselves have not sought to spell these out, preferring instead to concentrate on the significance of standpoint theory for theory construction in the social sciences. This is ironic, given the claims made by standpoint theorists for the 'emancipatory' focus of standpoint theory, but it may well be that this is a reflection of the Marxist legacy on which standpoint theory was originally constructed, with its characteristic subordination of normative argument to social theory.

One way in which this is reflected in standpoint theory is the way in which inequality is treated as an epistemological problem, rather than as a normative problem.

It seems at least as plausible, however, to suppose that dominant groups favour the existing social order at least as much because they believe it to be justified as because they do not understand how it operates. Challenging their dominance will require not only an understanding of how institutions operate, but also some account of why we are justified in demanding that these institutions be altered and what form any alterations must take. Be that as it may, we can see how standpoint theory has contributed to demands for the inclusion of marginalised groups in the political process. The significance and limitations of this contribution can be better discerned by examining how standpoint theory might contribute to the sort of arguments for a more inclusive politics advanced by Anne Phillips and Iris Marion Young, not themselves standpoint theorists.<sup>64</sup>

Phillips contrasts two ideal-typical conceptions of politics: a politics of 'presence' and a politics of 'ideas'. Our existing conception of politics is that of a politics of ideas, i.e. one which recognises a plurality of ideas, beliefs, opinions and preferences. What is distinctive about this politics is that it recognises a plurality of ideas, 'all of which may stem from a variety of experience, but are considered as in principle detachable from this.'<sup>65</sup> This detachability is important for it is what allows representation to take place, i.e. beliefs can be represented by persons who need not have had the experiences which led them to be formed in the first place. In this way, a male representative can conceivably articulate and represent the beliefs and preferences of female constituents. The politics of presence, by contrast, focuses on the plurality of identities, e.g. gender and ethnic identities, present in society and its proponents argue for

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<sup>64</sup> This 'inclusive' politics has been termed a 'politics of recognition'. See Charles Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Elizabeth Kiss, 'Democracy and the politics of recognition,' in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds.) *Democracy's Edges*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 193-209; and Nancy Fraser's 'Recognition and redistribution: a critical reading of Iris Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference*,' *Journal of Political Philosophy* 3 (1995), pp.166-80, and 'Rethinking Recognition,' *New Left Review* 3 (2000), pp.107-120.

<sup>65</sup> Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.6.

...the political inclusion of groups that have come to see themselves as marginalised or silenced or excluded. In this major reframing of the problems of democratic equality, the separation between 'who' and 'what' is to be represented, and the subordination of the first to the second, is very much up for question.<sup>66</sup>

From the point of view of the politics of presence, the separation of experience and belief perpetuates the exclusion of the marginalised because their presence in the political process is strictly unnecessary if their preferences can be represented by others.

Clearly a standpoint pluralism such as that of Stanley and Wise supports the purest conception of the politics of presence, that is to say, a politics which would take a strictly participatory form, rejecting the idea of representation entirely. On the other hand, other versions of standpoint theory support a modified politics of ideas, namely, representative democracy, in that while the ideas of women could never be represented by men, they could at least be represented by other women who share the experiences and perspectives to be represented. Equally, we could imagine a situation in which the perspectives of black women would be represented only by black women, and so on. In allowing the representation of ideas, this is not a pure politics of presence, but rather takes the form of a modified politics of ideas, albeit one which denies the separation of experience, and therefore of identity, from perspective. Standpoint theory gives the strongest possible support for such a politics, one which centres on the inclusion of members of marginal groups in the political process, because it flatly denies that the ideas and preferences which arise out of the experiences of members of a particular group can be communicated to and represented by non-group members. If we are concerned to have an adequately inclusive politics of ideas, then we have no choice but

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<sup>66</sup> Phillips, The Politics of Presence, p.5.

to adopt measures to include representatives who share the identity of those they represent.

Phillips herself argues for a similarly modified politics of ideas but firmly rejects the support of standpoint theory.<sup>67</sup> This is for the sort of reasons outlined above, namely that the idea that experience translates directly into an unambiguous set of political demands must fail, 'because each woman can lay claim to a multiplicity of identities, each of which may associate her with different kinds of shared experiences.'<sup>68</sup> Because of this, she argues, the presence of female representatives is not necessarily a guarantee that the interests of women, however defined, will indeed be represented.<sup>69</sup> She also argues that this complexity of experience may mean that 'initial differences' between men and women in politics, 'may be far outweighed by the common experiences men and women will later share in making their way through political life.'<sup>70</sup> This even admits the possibility that men may understand and represent the interests of women: there is no conceptual barrier dividing differently situated persons, as is supposed by standpoint theorists.

Phillips continues to argue, however, that there is still a good case for increasing the participation of members of excluded groups in the political process, albeit one which 'inevitably operates in a framework of probabilities rather than certainties.'<sup>71</sup> This is because, first of all, there are reasons to suppose that persons in different social contexts and roles will indeed experience the world differently and that they may have distinct ideas about the world, their place in it, and their interests. This

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<sup>67</sup> She says that, 'the central thesis of this book' is 'that while the politics of ideas is an inadequate vehicle for dealing with political exclusion, there is little to be gained by simply switching to a politics of presence.' Phillips, The Politics of Presence, p.24-5.

<sup>68</sup> This idea that women have potentially conflicting identities, i.e. those of gender and class, is the theme of one of Phillips' earlier books, Divided Loyalties, (London: Virago, 1987). Phillips, The Politics of Presence, p.10.

<sup>69</sup> Phillips, The Politics of Presence, p.82.

<sup>70</sup> Phillips, The Politics of Presence, p.75.

<sup>71</sup> Phillips, The Politics of Presence, p.82.

does not require that one adopt a standpoint theory account of experience and belief with its peculiar account of communicability and authority. Granting that ideas and preferences may be communicated to differently situated others and that they may be represented by such others, it is still probable that where women and members of ethnic minorities are not adequately represented in the political process, their interests will not *in fact* be adequately articulated, and secondly that they may not be pressed as forcefully by representatives who belong to different social groups. This is both empirically plausible and normatively sound: if interests are not properly articulated in the political process, where they may fail to be taken into account or be wrongly interpreted, then the policies formed as a consequence run the risk of failing to address the interests and needs of those represented. The recognition that differently situated persons may have significantly different interpretations of the world is a precondition of the demand for a more inclusive politics. In the next chapter, the link between situation and perspective will be accounted for in a way that preserves the idea of plurality but avoids the weaknesses of the standpoint theorists' understanding of this relation.

Iris Marion Young makes a similar argument for the representation of marginal groups, resting it upon an epistemic conception of situation.<sup>72</sup> She also argues for a deliberative style of politics on top of the demand for increased representation. She does not appear to consider, however, whether this conception of situation can underwrite a specifically deliberative politics. Young argues that the idea that deliberation upon matters of public policy should be impartial has served to prevent the articulation of the perspectives of marginal groups in the political process. As long as policy makers are impartial, it is suggested, there is no need to worry about including members of marginalised groups in the political process. This way of conceiving of public deliberation simply ignores the way in which we are all situated in a variety of

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<sup>72</sup> Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).



social locations, with distinct identities and perspectives. When we reason impartially we are required to set aside these fundamental facts and to discount our particular perspectives, as if impartiality were, by contrast, itself a version of the 'God's eye view' to which our particular perspectives must approximate. In practice this results in the 'universalisation' of the perspective of whatever powerful group has succeeded in presenting itself as the representative of this impartial view.

Young would like to see a public sphere which recognises the fact that our perspectives are decisively shaped by our social location and in which the plurality of these perspectives are adequately represented. In place of the homogeneity of the 'impartial' public sphere in which the partial views of the dominant group are treated as 'universal' we should aim for what she calls the 'effective recognition and representation' of the distinct voices and perspectives of oppressed and disadvantaged groups.<sup>73</sup> By 'effective' Young envisages something more than simply proportional representation for the reason that this might not of itself prove 'effective'.<sup>74</sup>

Young is not simply interested in representation. She stresses that she is interested in something more than mere interest group politics, and her argument for the representation of marginal groups is not aimed to support this style of politics, one in which political activity is thought of as involving no more than the rational pursuit of the interest of the group to which one belongs. Young favours deliberative politics, which means that political activity is to be thought of as involving the attempt to understand and consider perspectives other than one's own. Her notion of politics is not only one in which a plurality of perspectives will be represented, but also one in which citizens will be expected to deliberate with others who do not share their particular beliefs. It is an inclusive, communicative conception of democracy. Political decision making should be guided by discussion which will 'enrich everyone's

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<sup>73</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p.187.

<sup>74</sup> See Brian Barry's objection to the idea that groups are not adequately represented where they are not successful. Barry, 'Is Democracy Special?' in *Democracy, Power, and Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.24-60.

understanding'.<sup>75</sup> Young argues that only if the true diversity of views present in society is articulated in public deliberation can we have proper deliberation.<sup>76</sup> Recognition and inclusion of this diversity in the political process is a condition of deliberation. Existing institutions are insufficiently inclusive on her view, and this directly affects the fairness of the decision-making process.

Young strengthens the case for representation at the expense of deliberation, by arguing that only members of oppressed groups can truly understand the perspective of that group. To suppose otherwise, she says, is to deny the fact that we are situated, that we are all placed in distinct social contexts, for if we can adopt the perspective of others then the idea of situation no longer serves any purpose. To the extent that this is the case, however, it is hard to see how differently situated persons can deliberate with each other, given that their respective perspectives are necessarily inaccessible to others:

To be sure, subjects are not opaque to one another, their difference is not absolute. But especially when class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age difference define different social locations, one subject cannot fully empathise with another in a different social location, adopt her point of view; if that were possible then the social locations would not be different.<sup>77</sup>

This restates the standpoint argument that perspective is connected to situation in such a way as to render one's perspective inaccessible to differently situated others and this view, as we saw, rests on a mistake.

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<sup>75</sup> Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, p.189.

<sup>76</sup> It would appear natural to say that without the articulation of the full range of opinion present in society, we should fall short of 'impartial' deliberation. Young, however, despite objecting to the partiality of dominant groups, also says she rejects the idea of impartiality *per se*. Nonetheless, it seems more accurate to say that she objects only to certain ways of conceiving of impartiality, ways which deny obvious facts like situation.

<sup>77</sup> Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, p.105.

Young fails to notice that deliberative politics requires not only the inclusion of diverse perspectives in political decision-making, but also that deliberation is supposed to involve a transformation of the views of those who engage in deliberation, so that decisions made following such a process will be better informed and more just. If participants in deliberation are to transform their views in these ways the following conditions must be met: participants must be able to communicate their perspectives to others, and they must be capable of adopting an impartial stance with respect to their own perspectives, if communication is not to fall upon deaf ears. There would be little point in communicating if participants obstinately retained their existing beliefs and continue to press their pre-deliberative interests irrespective of whatever communication took place. Deliberation could not take place without communicability but would be wholly empty without impartiality. Without the demand that participants modify their views in response to the just claims of others, deliberation would be reduced to a mere politics of 'testimony' in which 'participants' would do little more than set out their own 'authoritative' perspectives.<sup>78</sup>

Clearly this is all that can be extracted from an epistemic understanding of situation such as that advanced by standpoint theorists and which influences Young's conception of group identity. Personal testimony would be authoritative but incomprehensible to differently situated others and therefore immune to criticism by them. As noted above, Stanley and Wise extend this respect for the perspectives of others so far as to suppose that we ought not challenge the self-understandings of persons who otherwise appear to us as oppressed. The standpoint theory critique of 'universalism' contributes to demands for inclusion. However, the point of 'inclusion' is

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<sup>78</sup>Lynn M. Sanders criticises deliberative democracy on the grounds that it privileges the educated and articulate who are best placed to engage in argumentative discourse. She proposes to supplement this with 'testimony', on the grounds that this at least ensures the articulation of the perspectives of those who may not otherwise be able to ensure a hearing for their views. This proposal has some merit: Sanders does not propose to replace argument with testimony, and anything which can serve to enrich deliberation should be welcomed. The danger lies in an exclusive politics of testimony which displaces argumentation and would claim an authoritative status for such testimony based on standpoint theory assumptions about self-transparency, and claims to epistemic authority. Sanders, 'Against deliberation,' *Political Theory* 25 (1997), pp.347-76.

unclear, given the strictures of standpoint theorists about communicability and authority. Certainly, a standpoint theory understanding of the connection between situation and perspective is incompatible with a deliberative conception of democracy.

One might say, 'too bad for deliberative democracy', but this would be a mistake. As will be argued later, the idea that politics should be deliberative, which is to say, both inclusive and transformative, rests on a commitment to equal respect. If an epistemic conception of situation such as that embodied in standpoint theory is incompatible with deliberative politics, this suggests that there may be something wrong both with its understanding of situation and with its interpretation of what is involved in treating others as equals. On one hand, standpoint theory contributes to arguments for the recognition of plurality, but while this recognition can play a part in our interpretation of the requirements of equality, it seems wrong to suppose that treating others as equals extends to respecting their views about themselves and the world at large as authoritative and uncriticisable.<sup>79</sup>

Far from embodying a determination to treat others as equals, one might argue, on the contrary, that such a position actually entails a profound indifference to others and their views. The idea of authoritative testimony to which standpoint theory gives rise does not imply that we ought to listen to others, but rather that we withdraw ourselves from them. If we universalise the standpoint theory account of situation and perspective, as Stanley and Wise do, then it is clear that this position gives no one a reason to engage with others at all, for we can neither understand nor learn from them: our own perspective would be as immune to their criticism as theirs would be to ours. The conclusion Stanley and Wise draw from their account is that sociologists may only speak with any authority about themselves, but what seems to be admirable humility from one point of view, has unfortunate consequences for the idea that we ought to try to understand and respond to the claims of others, when considered from a larger

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<sup>79</sup> Charles Larmore comments on the confusion of respecting persons with respecting their beliefs in *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.64.

perspective.<sup>80</sup> A truly egalitarian recognition of difference would not rely upon such an epistemically copperfastened respect for others' beliefs. Instead it would require us to deliberate with them: to challenge and be challenged in return, in the hope that each may learn from the deliberative encounter. The suggestion that we respect others by respecting their beliefs does not provide reasons to respond to their claims, but rather supports a profound indifference to the claim of others.

In view of the unattractive ethical and political implications of this understanding of situation, it may appear tempting to reinstate some form of 'universalism' which simply denied that situation could contribute to significant differences in perspective. On the other hand, we could choose to acknowledge that there *are* connections between situation and perspective and seek instead to arrive at an understanding of these connections which was not subject to the criticisms made here of standpoint theory and its epistemic understanding of situation. In this way we could preserve the idea of plurality while presenting an understanding of it which was compatible with the two preconditions of a properly egalitarian understanding of our relations with others: communicability and impartiality. It will be argued that a hermeneutic understanding of situation can form the basis of such an account.

The next Chapter will build upon the public conception of meaning and understanding set out here by outlining its place in the hermeneutic of tradition. This joins the pluralism defended in Chapter Two with the theory of meaning outlined here. The resulting idea of what it means to be situated in a context will combine the emphasis on the political significance of the existence of distinct identities and perspectives found in standpoint theory, with a hermeneutic emphasis on opacity and self-interpretability. Recognition of this feature of situation is, as has been suggested already, a prerequisite of social criticism, for if we were transparent to ourselves, or if our views were deemed immune to criticism, a project of social criticism could gain no purchase. The argument presented in this Chapter should serve to show that the

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<sup>80</sup> This conflicts with Harding's idea that social theory must try to take the perspectives of the marginal into account. Stanley and Wise, Breaking Out Again, p.165.

politics of recognition cannot be grounded in such claims, and that they cannot be regarded as counting against the possibility of social criticism. It will be argued in the next Chapter, however, that while the hermeneutic understanding of situation is sound, the version of social criticism which has been derived from it is unnecessarily hostile to impartial morality because it rests on an overly reductive understanding of context.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HERMENEUTIC SITUATION

Hermeneutics provides the basis for an alternative understanding of what it means to be situated in a context<sup>1</sup> The hermeneutic understanding of situation can explain how it is that people come to have differing perspectives without claims to transparency, epistemic authority, or the incommunicability that go with them. It is an account which incorporates both the anti-foundationalism set out in Chapter Two, and the understanding of language as a social institution set out in Chapter Three.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this hermeneutic understanding of our situatedness has given rise to another sort of misunderstanding: it has bolstered the arguments of moral particularists against 'abstract' universalist morality, as it is taken to show that there are no universal or transcultural norms.<sup>3</sup> In the place of universalist morality we must have a morality or practice of social criticism which, derived from this understanding of situation, is interpretive. This means that it is concerned with the interpretation of our shared values and traditions, and typically operates by appeal to a deeper understanding of these.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hans Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method: Philosophical Hermeneutics: Reason in an Age of Science; Zygmunt Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science (London: Hutchinson, 1978); Josef Bleicher (ed.) Contemporary Hermeneutics, (London: Routledge, 1980); Anthony Giddens, 'Hermeneutics and social theory,' in G. Shapiro and A. Sica (eds.) Hermeneutics: questions and prospects, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Jean Grondin, Sources of Hermeneutics, and Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics; D. C. Hoy, The Critical Circle, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Brice R. Wachterhauser (ed.) Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); and Paul Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and The Conflict of Interpretations, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> On this connection see Karl Otto Apel, Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, Objectivity, Relativism, Truth, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Essays on Heidegger and Others, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and Truth and Progress, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Also Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice, Thick and Thin, and Interpretation and Social Criticism.

The norm of impartiality is particularly heavily criticised as it is taken to embody the fundamental error of universalism: the belief that we can and must step outside our situation in some sense in order to view it objectively. The epistemic understanding of situation presented us with a problem about communication with differently situated others, but here the problem is that while communication is thought unproblematic, we cannot engage in moral deliberation with others because we have no impartial, objective stance from which we can judge the beliefs concerned. Without this, attempts to deliberate can amount to no more than the attempt to *impose* one's principles on others. If we are to show that deliberation is possible, then this objection must also be overcome.

The task is, firstly, to show how a hermeneutic conception of situation can account for the plurality of perspectives found in society, and secondly to show how universalism, and impartiality in particular, is compatible with this understanding of situation. My strategy is to exploit the conceptual pluralism set out in Chapter Two in order to argue that the attempt to draw particularist ethical conclusions from the (ontological) idea of situation is insufficiently pluralist. Particularism is pluralist in the sense that it argues that different cultures have their own particular moral outlooks and it relies on this idea to accuse universalist morality of seeking to impose uniformity. However, in order to draw these conclusions particularism assumes the truth of a reductive account of morality founded on the assumption that a socio-historical description of moral principles and practices provides a comprehensive account of those principles. By showing how particularists adopt this covert foundationalism and adapt morality to suit it, their opposition to universalism and impartiality will be shown to be unfounded, as it will be argued that the possibility of such morality is a matter of standpoint, and this cannot be eliminated from a pluralist view of the world.



*Hermeneutics: tradition and situation.*

The term 'hermeneutics' covers both the practice of interpretation and reflection upon that practice. Originally, the field of hermeneutics covered the application of philological techniques to sacred and legal texts. The art of hermeneutics came into play whenever vague or conflicting passages in the text at hand made interpretation necessary. The central idea of the hermeneutic tradition is that of the hermeneutic circle, formulated by the German philologist Friedrich Ast in the early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The claim expressed by the idea of the hermeneutic circle is that understanding essentially involves a circular movement between the individual parts and the whole of that which is to be understood. It is not simply the case that the part is meaningful only in relation to some whole, but also that their relation has a circular character: in the course of reading the text one is compelled to anticipate the whole in order to make sense of the parts, but as one reads on one inevitably alters one's understanding of the whole and this altered understanding in turn reflects back upon the parts, and so on. The relation between whole and part is thus conceived as dynamic, each being modified in the light of one's understanding of the other.

The Romantic era saw the field of hermeneutics being expanded beyond texts as Friedrich Schleiermacher developed a psychological model of interpretation in which the interpreter was to aim at interpreting the individual text or work of art as an expression of the author's creativity. This necessitated inquiry beyond the text and into the author's intentions. Later the scope of hermeneutic understanding was taken to be that of human action *per se* as historical and social studies sought to stake out a special place for themselves in the face of the encroachments of the natural sciences. This essentially Kantian division between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften* remains very much with us today. Traditionally, the latter study human action conceived as intentional whereas the former treat human behaviour as subject to causal explanation

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Ast (1778-1841) See Zygmunt Bauman, Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences, p.28.

like other features of the natural world. What is distinctive about the contemporary hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer is that it takes its lead from Heidegger and is cast in *ontological* terms. This fact alone has presented some difficulties in determining its ethical implications. This is not to say that Gadamer's analysis of understanding does not itself reflect certain evaluative and normative preferences, but only that it is not presented in the first instance in a prescriptive form.

Contemporary hermeneutics, while still premised on the idea of understanding as a circular process, is not concerned primarily with texts or action but focuses on the connection between understanding and ontology, - the idea that we are interpreting, interpretable beings. On this view we are essentially self-interpreting animals, whose selfhood is tied up with self-understanding such that self-understanding is actually central to self-realisation. The circular movement between whole and part becomes the movement between our projected understanding of ourselves and particular actions and events in our lives. Gadamer credits the decisive shift in perspective to Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology: 'The concept of understanding is no longer a methodological concept [...] Understanding is the original character of the being of human life itself.' Heidegger, he says, 'revealed the projective character of all understanding and conceived the act of understanding itself as the movement of transcendence, of moving beyond being.'<sup>5</sup>

The claim that our being is inseparable from our self-understanding, while evidently anti-naturalistic, is not meant in the first place as a radically subjectivist, existentialist thesis about our capacity to choose ourselves.<sup>6</sup> We are 'thrown' beings: we find ourselves thrown into a pre-existing world, into a particular situation within it and as Gadamer emphasises, we are thrown into a particular relation to tradition:

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<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.230.

<sup>6</sup> On the contrast between a hermeneutic understanding of thrownness and that of existentialism see Charles Taylor's 'Self-interpreting animals,' in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.45-76.

...correspondence with tradition is as original and essential a part of the historical finiteness of There-being as its projectedness towards future possibilities of itself. Heidegger was right to insist that what he called 'Thrownness' belongs together with that which is projected. Thus there is no understanding or interpretation in which the totality of this existential structure does not function, even if the intention of the knower is simply to read 'what is there' and to discover from its sources 'how it really was.'<sup>7</sup>

Self-understanding is thus always mediated by tradition, by the social-historical vocabularies within which we seek to understand ourselves. The starting point of any projected understanding of ourselves is not *chosen* but *given* in this way according to Gadamer: 'Everything that makes possible and limits the project of There-being precedes it absolutely.'<sup>8</sup> So central is the notion of tradition to Gadamer's account of hermeneutic understanding that he terms the sort of consciousness, the outlook, characteristic of hermeneutics, 'consciousness of effective history'. This denotes an outlook which is not only attuned to the influence of history but which regards itself as fundamentally affected by it, in the sense that to view the world in this way is to be aware that it is tradition that shapes and *makes possible* our understanding.

The idea of 'thrownness' and of tradition are extremely useful for understanding the relationship between situation and perspective. On the epistemic view of situation, unmediated experience is what provides the link between situation and perspective. Because experience is thought to provide 'direct' access to the world, it is thought to determine your perspective such that to be placed in a particular social location will result in your having a set of experiences which then determine that you will share a

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<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, Truth and Method, p.232.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, Truth and Method, p.234.

perspective with others who share your situation and consequently your experiences. On the hermeneutic view, tradition provides the link between situation and belief. This explains how the situation one is thrown into shapes one's outlook and how one might share belief with others who have been shaped by the same tradition. However, it does not entail uniformity of belief because traditions are complex and open to a variety of interpretations. Secondly, it does not entail the idea that one cannot change one's beliefs: the traditions we encounter in the situations into which we are thrown provide us with starting points, no more.

That is to say that recognition of one's situatedness does not determine one's response to the traditions and identities which constitute it. It does not mean that one must simply endorse these. While we cannot escape our finitude, situation is itself complex and our response to our particular situation may likewise be complex. Consider, first of all, the variety of tradition and agents of socialisation which serve to constitute our identities. Our identities and perspectives may be shaped by our family background, gender, ethnicity, class, religion and nationality. They are shaped by our education, our work experiences, and our other pursuits, e.g. intellectual traditions. In each case, our position with regard to one identity can complicate our relation to another: differently gendered persons may be influenced by the 'same' culture, but more than likely in different ways. We need not endorse the identities and traditions that have shaped our self-hood: we can repudiate a religious identity, for example, or aspects of our national identity. These can be burdens as well as sources of self-esteem or respect.<sup>9</sup> Each repositioning may have a knock-on effect on our relationships to other persons, communities and traditions: to repudiate one may complicate one's relations to another. The plurality of elements in one's situation and the variety of ways one can respond to these, including revisions and repositionings, mean that situation is

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<sup>9</sup> Modern literature, not surprisingly, provides plenty of examples of this. Consider James Joyce's attitude to Ireland: a country to which he felt he could only respond with 'silence, exile, and cunning' *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. See also the novels of William Faulkner, whose characters cannot escape their identity and traditions as Southerners, but who cannot reconcile themselves to them either. An identity can be a predicament.

a complex phenomenon, and this suggests that we should be wary of characterising it in overly general terms, or of assuming that we can read off a person's perspectives from their perceived identity.

The relationship between a tradition and conceptual pluralism may be thought of in terms of the institutionalisation of certain interpretations, certain 'problems'. The idea of tradition serves to fill out the model of contextualisation set out in Chapter Two by introducing the idea that the problems which drive our interpretations, the questions which serve to select the objects and ranges of description with which we are concerned, are subject to institutionalisation. To the extent that we find ourselves thrown into a world not of our making, we find ourselves encountering a world in which certain problems and their attendant interpretations form socially institutionalised 'problematics'. Certain ways of thinking about the world become institutionalised, selecting objects and descriptions from the myriad of possible descriptions, and it is against this backdrop of problems and interpretations learned from our parents, schools, etc., that we learn to pose our own problems and offer our own interpretations.

However, while the hermeneutic idea of situation emphasises the way in which we find ourselves thrown into a world which is always already interpreted and problematised by the particular traditions we happen to encounter, we are free to modify our beliefs and revise our problems. It may be tempting to interpret Gadamer's insistence on our 'finitude' as implying that we are limited by our situation in such a way that we cannot break out of the limits of the particular traditions which serve to constitute our view of the world and of ourselves. This is a mistake, not only about the concept of situation, but also of Gadamer's interpretation of it. Finitude expresses the idea that we are in a certain sense, limited beings. Firstly, we are temporally limited, which is to say, our span of life is limited. Secondly, our beliefs are, in a sense, limited. Thirdly, we are limited in the sense that we are each just one person among others, living in a social world which we do not control. The first limitation needs no explanation, but the second two require a little explanation.

In what sense are our beliefs limited? Does this mean that we cannot change them, or that we cannot understand the beliefs of differently situated others? We have seen that the public character of meaning excludes the latter possibility, so this cannot be a legitimate sense of finitude. Our beliefs are limited, then, only in the sense that they fall short of constituting an absolute conception of the world. Because no interpretation can be shown to be absolute, changes of belief, while they can result in more comprehensive views, cannot be thought of in terms of a move from a limited to an absolute view, but are rather essentially finite in the sense that they will always be particular interpretations. The finitude of belief is simply that which attends the plurality of conceptual schemes. They are finite, and therefore plural rather than absolute.

This in turn has an ontological implication to the extent that self-hood is a matter of self-interpretation. Just as we are spatially and temporally finite, bounded beings, so too our self-interpretations will be limited, particular views, which cannot aspire to completeness. We are free, of course, to reinterpret ourselves, and we will naturally seek better interpretations of ourselves and our lives. The third sense in which we are finite is relevant here, i.e. with respect to our self-descriptions. While we can repudiate institutionalised ways of interpreting ourselves by redescribing ourselves in various ways, we cannot control others' interpretations of who or what we are. We are self-interpreting animals situated in a world of other self-interpreting animals, but of course, we are not simply self-interpreters, but self- and other- interpreters. Others are not, as I have argued already, logically constrained to accept our self-interpretations, and this can generate a host of personal and political problems. This is a problem posed by our finite condition. How we respond to our ontological condition, however, is a matter of morality.

How has hermeneutics been received amongst Anglo-American political theorists? Firstly one might note that in the history of political thought, where one might suppose hermeneutics to have had some influence, it has made scarcely any

impact at all. To the extent that historians of political thought have reflected upon their activities, they have chosen to articulate their concerns in terms drawn from ordinary language philosophy, but their concerns themselves clearly reflect the outlook of nineteenth century historicism. This history of political thought, which confines itself to the recovery of author's intentions, has essentially avoided any engagement with contemporary hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has not come to the attention of political theorists in this way.

One area in which hermeneutics has played a significant role in is the social sciences, where, along with a variety of other exotic theoretical perspectives, Schutz's phenomenology, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, and Winch's reworking of Weber in Wittgensteinian terms, hermeneutics has formed part of a reaction against positivist conceptions of social science, and here we can begin to see what hermeneutics' ethical implications it might be.<sup>10</sup> Social scientists turned to these continental perspectives in the 1960s in order to resist positivist demands that the methods of the social sciences reflect the ideal of a unified scientific methodology, that is, that they be conducted in essentially behaviourist terms. In place of this style of inquiry, with its rhetoric of scientific objectivity and detachment, sociologists were drawn to the idea that they should seek to understand or interpret human behaviour from within as it were, rather than seeking to provide explanations of it based on observation. This approach, which entails entering imaginatively into the forms of life under investigation, is often referred to as *Verstehen*. In place of the ideal of detachment as a prerequisite of inquiry, the *Verstehen* approach entails an engaged, participatory style of investigation. In order to understand a particular piece of behaviour one must relate it to a context of beliefs in a hermeneutic fashion, a task which requires that one learn the conceptual system of the group concerned. Understanding on this view is not obstructed by immersion in the social world; this immersion is what makes understanding possible.

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<sup>10</sup> See Bauman, *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*; Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*; and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1979).

Gadamer was concerned with precisely this issue, so it is not surprising that this is where hermeneutics first came to have some influence. He announced that

The following investigation starts with the resistance within modern science against the universal claim of scientific method. It is concerned to seek that experience of truth that transcends the sphere of control of scientific method wherever it is to be found, and to inquire into its legitimacy. Hence the human sciences are joined with modes of experience which lie outside science, with experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by methodological means proper to science.<sup>11</sup>

So the first thing to note is that hermeneutics sets its face against an epistemological conception of truth which is premised on an ideal of detachment, and which is conceived as absolute. Gadamer's response is to find some place for the truth which may be experienced in other spheres, but not to outline an alternative *method*.

It is difficult, however, to derive any determinate ethical position from this association. Hermeneutics represented only one of a number of 'humanist' positions which contributed to this revival of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and while it is fair to say that certain evaluative preferences lay behind this methodological dispute, the sociological idiom is not well suited to the articulation of ethical positions. What we can say is that the desire to reassert a place for an interpretive human science in the face of positivism was tied directly to a critique of the role of technology in society, and of the tendency to assimilate the social sciences themselves to the project of administering society. The fear that modernity as a whole was bound to the increasing instrumentalisation of human relationships was a theme in Weber's sociology, as well

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<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.xii.



as playing a central role in the explicitly radical critique of the early Frankfurt School. Of course, while one can regard resistance to the technologisation of social life as violating the injunction that we treat others not only as means but also as ends, it can also be motivated by a more conservative fear of the disruption of traditional communities and patterns of life. However it seems clear enough that amongst social scientists of this era the turn away from positivism was motivated by something more like the former: that to adopt this approach was to affirm a commitment to an ideal of human beings as free and creative beings, rather than as objects of manipulation. In this respect, the social scientific reception of hermeneutics at this time is unlike its more conservative reception amongst political theorists in the 1980s.

As for Gadamer himself, while he is personally a man of a conservative disposition and unlikely to have been sympathetic to the more radical aspects of these movements, the objection he makes to a merely methodological understanding is surprisingly Kantian in tone. We aim only to understand another,

...in the same way that we understand any other typical event in our experiential field, i.e. he is predictable. His behaviour is as much a means to our end as any other means. From the moral point of view this attitude to the 'Thou' is something that is directed ultimately towards oneself and contradicts the moral definition of man. Kant as we know, in interpreting the categorical imperative said, *inter alia*, that the other should never be used as a means, but always as an end in himself...<sup>12</sup>

Habermas, however, has expressed reservations about Gadamer's formulation of hermeneutics. Firstly, he fears that Gadamer tends to 'absolutize' language in such a way as to render hermeneutics idealist. To this extent, he argues, it must be

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<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, Truth and Method, p.322.

supplemented by causal explanation because what he calls the 'meta-institution of language' itself depends upon 'social processes that are not reducible to normative relationships'.<sup>13</sup> As such it cannot be the sole basis of a critical theory of society. While praising the fruitfulness of Gadamer's notion of understanding as a fusion of horizons, Habermas also expresses concern about the role of tradition in his work. He argues that Gadamer fails to clearly distinguish between ordinary instances of understanding in communication and those situations which 'appear when traditions are disrupted or foreign cultures are encountered or when we analyse familiar traditions and cultures as if they were foreign.' Habermas argues that 'a controlled distanciation can raise understanding from a prescientific experience to the rank of a reflected procedure.'<sup>14</sup> Habermas worries that Gadamer's failure to articulate this difference is a result of his unnecessarily forceful opposition to scientific method on one hand and is, perhaps, motivated by a certain conservatism on the other. To Habermas it appears that Gadamer overstates his case against method and that it would be better to regard 'hermeneutic experience as the ground of the hermeneutic sciences' rather than in opposition to such a conception. Gadamer's traditionalism leads him to downplay the extent to which, 'in grasping the genesis of the tradition from which it proceeds and on which it turns back, reflection shakes the dogmatism of life practices.'<sup>15</sup> Gadamer is charged then with harbouring a fundamentally anti-Enlightenment, Burkean position, insofar as he turns 'the insight into the structure of prejudgements involved in understanding into a rehabilitation of tradition as such.'<sup>16</sup>

This charge would seem to have some force, not least because of the way that hermeneutics has been seized upon by critics of liberalism in the 1980s. Gadamer

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<sup>13</sup> Jurgen Habermas, 'A review of Gadamer's Truth and Method', in Brice R. Wachterhauser (ed.) Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp.243-276, p.272. A modified version of this review appears in Habermas' On the Logic of the Social Sciences, Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A. Stark (trans.) (Cambridge MA: MIT, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Habermas, 'A review of Gadamer's Truth and Method', p.266.

<sup>15</sup> Habermas, 'A review of Gadamer's Truth and Method', p.268.

<sup>16</sup> Habermas, 'A review of Gadamer's Truth and Method', p.268.

himself, it must be admitted, is not content with insisting that understanding is mediated by traditional categories and tropes and that it essentially requires a prejudgement or projection to begin. He explicitly questions the Enlightenment ideal of rationality as detachment, i.e. freedom from prejudice. He suggests, in a polemical vein, that hermeneutics must begin with a critique of the Enlightenment attitude to prejudice:

The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the enlightenment, will prove itself, to be a prejudice, the removal of which opens that way to an appropriate understanding of our finitude, which dominates not only our humanity, but also our historical consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

One might even see his deliberate choice of the term 'prejudice' over something like 'pre-understanding' as a mischievous expression of this anti-Enlightenment stance. Acceptance of the role of prejudice in understanding, he claims, entails acceptance that 'the idea of an absolute reason is impossible for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete historical terms, i.e. it is not its own master, but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances by which it operates.'<sup>18</sup>

Does this mean that hermeneutics is irredeemably conservative in its implications? Gadamer's language invites a particular reading of hermeneutics, one which is traditionalist and communitarian in its response to our ontological situatedness. This reading of the hermeneutic idea of situation is mistaken, however, in that it fails to grasp the fact that the attack on detached 'Enlightenment' reason is no more than an attack upon the idea of an absolute conception of the world and that this does not itself entail a traditionalist, parochial, ethical response to our situation.

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<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 244.

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, Truth and Method, p.245.

Gadamer has invited this misreading, but despite his personal conservatism, the parochial reading of situation flatly counters his own notion of the 'hermeneutic encounter', which is more indebted to universalist morality than traditionalist moral particularists recognise.

### *Hermeneutic Situation and moral particularism.*

Richard Rorty appeals to hermeneutics in his assault upon the ideas of epistemology and of philosophical foundations *per se*. After epistemology, he argues, comes hermeneutics. He says of epistemology,

The notion that there is a permanent neutral framework, whose 'structure' philosophy can display is the notion that the objects to be confronted by the mind; or the rules which constrain all inquiry are common to all discourse on a given topic. Thus epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable. Hermeneutics is largely a struggle against this assumption.<sup>19</sup>

It's not hard to see why Rorty should think this. The idea of a hermeneutic circle in understanding has implications far beyond the methodology of the social sciences, as Gadamer's rejection of 'absolute reason' indicates. The idea that understanding is essentially circular strikes directly at the idea that there can be such a thing as a presuppositionless, self-evident basis for knowledge. The claim that all understanding starts in *medias res* with an anticipation of meaning, a pre-understanding, supposes that there is no foundation we can work our way back to which will provide an

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p.316.

incontrovertible deductive basis for our beliefs. On this view this is as true of the natural sciences as it is of the human sciences, i.e. that while the techniques will differ and while it may never be fruitful to study Shakespeare with a particle accelerator, the basic idea that our questions arise out of a background constituted by tradition holds for both types of endeavour. The lesson of historians of science like Kuhn is that physicists work as much against a background of institutionalised problematics which orient their experimental projects as literary scholars do.<sup>20</sup> If one adopts this view of the universality of hermeneutics, then one will feel that Habermas' idea that hermeneutics must be supplemented by causal explanations of extra-linguistic phenomena is misconceived, not because one cannot provide such explanations, but because even this falls *within* the ambit of hermeneutics. This view of the scope of hermeneutics is not that of Gadamer, who is much more cautious in the claims he makes, but is largely correct.

On Rorty's account, philosophy has claimed a special place for itself in our culture because of its special relation to knowledge, a relation constituted by the idea that there is such a thing as epistemology. The authority of philosophy stems from its ability to show how our claims to knowledge of the world are to be grounded and in this way it can carve culture up into distinct spheres like 'science', 'morality' and 'aesthetics'. This is premised on the idea that there is something called 'mind' which confronts the world and which is capable of representing it. The twentieth century has characteristically resolved older questions about how our ideas come to represent the world into questions about how language hooks onto the world: how it refers. 'Analytic' philosophy derives its name from the project of showing how meaningful statements could be analysed into an ideal language of some sort, the elements of which are thought to stand in some basic picturing relation to the external world. In its heyday, movements like logical positivism, whose partisans considered the concepts of physics to be such an ideal language, vigorously denounced as 'meaningless' any

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, (1962) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

propositions which did not lend themselves to analysis into the elements of the ideal language.<sup>21</sup> While this specific version of analysis is long gone, the idea that some such reduction is possible still haunts contemporary philosophy.

We cannot have such a grounding, however, because attempts to spell out such a theory of the correspondence of between propositions and the world fatally assume that which they purport to explain. With the failure of this project, we must bid farewell to the idea that we can have a comprehensive worldview: an ideal language which grounds all of our everyday concepts. In Wittgensteinian terms, this project entails the fruitless effort to get between language and the world in order to see how the two are related.<sup>22</sup> Most recent attempts to fill out some such theory have set out from our undoubted causal interaction with the world and sought to explicate reference in terms of this relation. However, it is clear that there is a difference between what causes us to possess concepts and what it is that these concepts refer to. Faced with this oversupply of causes, one might seek to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate causes, but this, of course, presupposes the very ability which the causal theory of reference was meant to explain. Philosophers like Putnam and Rorty agree that there is no way to explain how language hooks onto the world that does not presuppose an explanation of this very relation. Rorty chooses to express this insight in explicitly hermeneutic terms: 'we will not be able to isolate basic elements except on the basis of a prior knowledge of the whole fabric within which these elements occur.'<sup>23</sup>

The implication of this is that the attempt to claim a privileged epistemological status for any particular vocabulary must fail. In Putnam's terms it spells the end for the ideas that we can have a presuppositionless 'God's eye view' of the world. With the demise of this view go the various physicalist reductionisms, and in their stead we must

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<sup>21</sup> A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth, and Logic, (1936) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> 'Hilary Putnam and the relativist menace.' in Rorty, Truth and Progress: philosophical papers vol. 3, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.48n.

<sup>23</sup> Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p.319.

learn to accommodate ourselves to a conceptual pluralism in which we have at our disposal a variety of conceptual schemes for our various purposes.

Having said this, the implications Rorty draws from this anti-foundationalist argument are extremely problematic. Hermeneutics is not to be understood simply as a new way of doing epistemology. Rather, the problems around which epistemology was constituted are no longer to be seen as important. In effect, Rorty argues that we can still do epistemology but that we must not endow it with the foundational significance which it once had. The old dualism of the 'hard' natural sciences and the 'soft' human sciences should be replaced with a new distinction which cuts across the old epistemological and ontological assumptions.<sup>24</sup> Rorty proposes that we distinguish simply between 'normal' and 'abnormal' discourses where 'abnormal' discourse, the special business of hermeneutics, will be concerned with conducting 'conversations' with new and unfamiliar points of view, looking for agreement rather than presupposing it.<sup>25</sup> He suggests that rather than thinking in terms of objective and subjective, we can now think instead simply in terms of familiar and unfamiliar. Hermeneutics, he says

...is the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse - the attempt to make some sense of what is going on at a stage when we are still unsure about it, to describe it and thereby to begin an epistemological account of it.<sup>26</sup>

Interpretation, on this view, is as much the business of scientists as it is of literary critics.

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<sup>24</sup> Putnam shrewdly observes that for a pragmatist, Rorty is remarkably fond of dualisms. Putnam, *Pragmatism*, p.64.

<sup>25</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.332.

<sup>26</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.321.

Onto this distinction between normal and abnormal discourse he also wishes to map a distinction between 'finding' and 'making' which is central to his 'Nietzschean' view of hermeneutics. He argues that the distinction between 'what is out there' and 'what we make', the traditional terms in which we think of the subjective/objective split, is undermined by the argument against the 'God's eye view'. Consequently, we cannot pretend to distinguish any longer between scheme and content in our apprehension of the external world. In view of this, we should stop pretending that it is possible to draw a clear distinction between what we contribute to knowledge and what the world contributes. It makes no sense then to continue to treat science as that enterprise concerned with 'finding out' truths about the world, when we might just as well say that the development of its increasingly sophisticated vocabulary for talking about the world is *creating* new possibilities, not finding them out.<sup>27</sup>

Rorty goes on to flesh this out in terms of a distinction between 'edifying' and 'systematic' philosophy which serves to clarify what he means by 'making the unfamiliar, familiar'. On this view hermeneutics is essentially a poetic enterprise concerned with *Bildung*, or self-formation rather than with the discovery of truth. Gadamer, he says,

...develops his notion of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (the sort of consciousness of the past which changes us) to characterise an attitude interested not so much in what is out there in the world, or in what happened in history, as in what we can get out of nature and history for our own uses...

From this point of view, 'the way things are said is more important than the possession of truths.'<sup>28</sup> Systematic philosophers on the other hand 'are constructive and offer

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<sup>27</sup> Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p.331.

<sup>28</sup> Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p.359. Rorty also refers to 'the hermeneutic point of view, from which the acquisition of truth dwindles in importance...' p.365. This reading of



arguments', while philosophers who are concerned with edification are more concerned with taking us out of ourselves, extending and changing us by encounters with strange and unfamiliar points of view.

Significantly, Rorty does not think that this can be done by offering *arguments* for adopting new views because these will provide justification in terms of beliefs which we already hold. In this way philosophers will fall back on familiar metaphors like 'finding' rather than genuinely transforming themselves. The aim of the edifying philosopher is simply to make his new vocabulary 'look attractive' to his fellows, and his tools are not arguments, but 'satires, parodies and aphorisms'.<sup>29</sup> Rorty is careful to deny that he holds the view that we cannot break out of the particular vocabulary which we set out with: we are free to adopt new ones, but we cannot be *argued* into so doing, but only *caused*.<sup>30</sup>

He sets out this scepticism about the limits of justification as follows:

The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honoured vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary. They are expected to show that central elements in that vocabulary are 'inconsistent' in their own terms or that they 'deconstruct themselves'. But that can *never* be shown. Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or vague, or 'merely metaphorical' is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging. For such use is after all the

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hermeneutics is challenged however by Georgia Warnke, who rightly points to Gadamer's own focus on truth. Warnke, 'Hermeneutics and the social sciences: a Gadamerian critique of Rorty,' *Inquiry* 28 (1998), pp.339-57, and *Gadamer*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

<sup>29</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.39 and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.369.

<sup>30</sup> 'Within a language game, within a set of agreements about what is possible and important, we can usefully distinguish reasons for belief from causes for belief which are not reasons... However, once we raise the question of how we get from one vocabulary to another, from one dominant metaphor to another the distinction between reasons and causes loses its utility.' Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p.48.

paradigm of coherent, meaningful, literal speech. Such arguments are always parasitic upon, and abbreviations for claims that a better vocabulary is available. Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which promises great things.<sup>31</sup>

From the point of view of the edifying, poetic philosopher the history of ideas must be regarded as no more than a sequence of 'tacit substitutions of a new vocabulary for an old one.' In each case we have simply 'made a change rather than discovered a fact.'<sup>32</sup> Our end, on this view, is the process of edification itself, i.e. that we undergo as many of these substitutions as possible, free from the metaphysical illusion that any of these are bringing us any closer to the Truth or the Good.

This gives rise to two conflicting views about the implications of hermeneutic antifoundationalism for morality and social criticism. One view is Nietzschean, poetic, ironic, while the other is communitarian and ethnocentric. The ironist is someone who knows that she has a variety of vocabularies available to her for describing both herself and the world around her. At any given point in time she is likely to treat a particular set of descriptions as more basic than any others. This is her 'final vocabulary'. However, unlike those who subscribe to the idea that there is some vocabulary which is more basic than others in the sense that it makes possible an 'absolute' conception of the world, the ironist knows that ultimately no vocabulary is any more basic than any other. Armed with this insight, ironists experiment with different vocabularies,

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<sup>31</sup> Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.9.

<sup>32</sup> Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.77.

continually redescribing themselves with the aim of recreating themselves.<sup>33</sup> In this way the ironist resembles Nietzsche's 'overman', who, knowing that he is the creator of value, that it is not 'found', aims to continually recreate himself with no other aim than to engage in this process of creation and recreation.<sup>34</sup>

The ironic or edifying philosopher will be a liberal according to Rorty. This foundationless liberalism is guided solely by the idea that 'cruelty is the worst thing we do' and it will dispense with the attempt to justify itself in terms of general principle, or appeal to ideas like universal human rights or other products of 'Enlightenment rationalism'. Rorty claims that his new vocabulary 'which revolves around notions like metaphor and self-creation rather than around notions of truth, rationality and moral obligation, is better suited for this purpose.'<sup>35</sup> He suggests, for example, that we should try to think about morality without forming general principles to regulate our actions at all. We should give up Kant and adopt models like Freud, he suggests, who focuses our attentions on how 'particular present situations are similar to or different from past actions and events.'<sup>36</sup>

This sort of particularism is apparently the logical consequence of the denial that there is any rational basis for adjudicating the claims of different cultures. In the absence of any ultimate self-evident foundations for our ethics Rorty believes that we must simply give up the idea that we can or should seek to justify ourselves to others, there simply are no reasons which can function universally because justifications only have some purchase within a particular cultural tradition. What objectivity there is then amounts to no more than solidarity, Rorty claims, because we can give no more sense to the idea that our beliefs are warranted than that our community agrees that they are

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<sup>33</sup> We exploit the idea of redescription to 'make the best selves for ourselves that we can'. Given Rorty's anti-foundationalism, this apparently perfectionist idea, must be understood in Nietzschean rather than Aristotelian terms. Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.80.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, (1883-5) R. J. Hollingdale (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

<sup>35</sup> Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.44.

<sup>36</sup> Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.33.

warranted: 'For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of our community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible.'<sup>37</sup>

Rorty argues that this view of objectivity is not to be regarded as relativist, but rather as ethnocentric. Rather than taking the line that every view is as good as any other, Rorty argues that 'there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society - ours - uses in one or another area of inquiry.'<sup>38</sup> Instead of adopting a nihilistic response to the plurality of competing descriptions of the world with which we are faced, or retreating into an untenable foundationalism, the rational thing to do is to privilege the beliefs and modes of justification characteristic of our culture. To condemn this view as parochial, Rorty alleges, is to commit oneself to an untenable relativism in which we are so open minded that our brains fall out!

This ethnocentrist position is not obviously liberal however: it excludes the possibility that a society's practices might be judged morally unacceptable either from within or from without, as communal agreement provides the last word in such questions. Redescription, central to Rorty's position as an alternative to justification in terms of general principles, is not designed to serve the end of social criticism. What role does it play then? Rorty's answer is not clear. It certainly plays a role in the life of the individual ironist, where self-description becomes an end in itself, but Rorty also suggests that redescription has a larger, public, role to play insofar as we can use the tool of redescription to foster solidarity beyond the confines of our existing political communities.<sup>39</sup> This goal is supposed to replace the 'Enlightenment' goal of

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<sup>37</sup> Rorty, 'Solidarity and Objectivity' in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: philosophical papers vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.23.

<sup>38</sup> Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p.23.

<sup>39</sup> 'The right way to construe the slogan ['we have obligations to human beings simply as such'] is as urging us to *create* a more expansive sense of solidarity that we presently have. The wrong way is to think of it as urging us to *recognise* such a solidarity as something that exists antecedently to our recognition of it.' Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.196.

'discovering' a common humanity, and redescription serves this end by helping to present others as 'people like us', fostering solidarity by playing down differences.

Many would feel that this sort of solidarity actually reproduces the worst aspects of 'Enlightenment universalism', i.e. that it is basically an assimilationist project which fails to respect people who differ from us in some ways. The only difference between Enlightenment universalism and Rortian solidarity, such a critic might say, is that the former was unwittingly biased in this way, while the latter is self-consciously ethnocentric. The 'public' use of redescription, however, runs into another sort of obstacle, one internal to Rorty's argument. Rorty proposes to retain the liberal idea of a distinction between public and private spheres, distinguished now by the fact that redescription will be restricted to the private sphere. The reason for making redescription private is that it is 'cruel' to redescribe other people.<sup>40</sup> It is cruel because people want to be described in their own terms.<sup>41</sup>

The idea that we cannot, or ought not, question other people's self-descriptions was central to Skinner's notion of historical context, and to Stanley and Wise's understanding of situation. Here the argument is not that we cannot redescribe others, for conceptual reasons, but rather than we ought not to do so for moral reasons. At this point we might wonder if the appeal to moral reasons might not permit redescrptions which excluded a person's self-description? For example, we might want to suggest that an individual is themselves cruel, dishonest, or brutal in their treatment of others, even in the face of that person's preference for a more flattering self-description. Rorty, however, disallows this for the reason that there are no general

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<sup>40</sup> 'The redescrbing ironist, by threatening one's final vocabulary, and thus one's ability to make sense of one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, powerless. Redescription often humiliates.' Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.90.

<sup>41</sup> 'Ironism, as I have defined it, results from the awareness of the power of redescription. But most people do not want to be redescrbed. They want to be taken on their own terms - taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something very cruel about that claim' Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.89.

principles which could act as a basis for such moral judgements.<sup>42</sup> Faced with the problem of weighing the cruelty meted out by someone who deceives themselves that they are kind or honest, or the 'cruelty' of challenging this description, ordinary moral reasoners would look for some principle to determine whether a redescription was justified, though unpleasant. Rorty, however, has closed the avenue to himself with his determination to reject moral principles.

Conceivably, he could appeal to the practices of the wider community to 'justify' such a redescription, but this too runs up against the ban on challenging an individual's self-description: a ban which cannot itself be justified in terms of any general principle. It is not clear, however, that the ban itself is warranted by what 'we' currently mean by 'cruel', i.e. the concept of cruelty is not simply applicable to every instance of causing harm or distress to someone, but only to cases in which the aim of the act in question is precisely to cause harm or distress. We can cause distress by accident, without being thought cruel, and as suggested above we can justifiably cause distress, where this is not the aim of our action, again, without being thought cruel. On one hand, Rorty's idea of 'liberalism' eschews the use of redescription as social criticism, while on the other hand the 'principle' which he appeals to in order to restrain a potentially redescriptive social criticism does not appear to be supported even by his own particularist 'ethic'.

Michael Walzer adopts a similarly particularist view, although he does not reject 'thin' universalist morality altogether, but rather places it in second place as a derivation of 'thick', particular, morality. He advances a 'radically particularist' account of morality and social criticism, based on the idea that meanings are fundamentally social and historical.<sup>43</sup> As such, they are plural, varying over time within particular

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<sup>42</sup> 'There is no neutral, non-circular way to defend the liberal's claim that cruelty is the worst thing we do...' Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p.197.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Walzer, claims that his position is 'radically particularist, and that meaning is basically social and historical *Spheres of Justice*, (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p.xiv and p. 9 respectively.

societies and also from one society to another. Unlike Rorty, he provides no argument to this effect, but the idea that these meanings cannot be traced back to some fundamentally shared set of meanings, serves as the premise of his particularism.

Because there are no 'a priori definitions of murder, deception, and betrayal,' the work of the philosopher must be that of interpreting the shared meanings of a particular community.<sup>44</sup> This motivates an attack on the idea of the social critic as a detached figure, whose criticism derives its force from this very detachment. This view is embedded in philosophical metaphors such as that of Plato's cave, or Nagel's 'view from nowhere', and in the idea that prophets, for example, must ascend a mountain in order to gain a critical perspective in society. Of this view, Walzer says

The moral world comes into view as the philosopher steps back in his mind from his social position. He wrenches himself loose from his parochial interests and loyalties, he abandons his own point of view and looks at the world, as Thomas Nagel argues, from 'no particular point of view'. The project is at least as heroic as climbing the mountain or marching into the desert. 'No particular point of view' is somewhere on the way to God's point of view, and what the philosopher sees from there is something like objective value.<sup>45</sup>

However, if meaning is social, and philosophy essentially a matter of interpretation rather than discovery or creation, the alternative views which Walzer considers, then the social critic must essentially be a 'connected' critic, a member of his society, if his criticism is to have any force.<sup>46</sup> Only because he is a member of a

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<sup>44</sup> Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism, p.25.

<sup>45</sup> Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism, p.5.

<sup>46</sup> Walzer is not wholly consistent on this point: he declines to say that 'discovery' and 'creation' are simply impossible or that they are possible, but really forms of interpretation in disguise. His view of the implication of the idea that meaning is social commits him to one or other of these views however.

particular society and his criticism is rooted in that society's shared stock of meanings can he effectively criticise it, but seeking to hold his fellows to his interpretation of their own best standards. There are no values independent of social meaning to be discovered, and the attempt to create them will either be wholly arbitrary, or, more likely, will in fact rely upon existing social values. The idea of creation covers not only Nietzschean interpretations of value, but also liberal constructivism such as that of Rawls, which adopts procedural tests for proposed moral principles.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike Rorty, Walzer does not wholly reject a certain moral universalism, but rather argues that instead of providing general principles which might be used to develop 'thick' local moralities such principles are themselves derived from local moralities and are strictly limited in their scope, being 'liberated' from their embeddedness in 'maximal' particular moralities at times of social change or crisis, when normal morality is disrupted. Walzer appeals to the phenomenon of 'thrownness' in according priority to particular moralities as this, he says, is how we first encounter morality. Consequently, we must conclude that it is 'thick from the beginning'.<sup>48</sup>

The view of morality as fundamentally local has implications for our relations with members of political communities: we must respect their particular thick morality. Arguing that mediaeval Christians, for example, had a very different set of beliefs about the meaning of life and death, he suggests, 'to this we ought certainly to defer, for it makes no moral sense to wag our finger at mediaeval Christians, insisting that they should have had our understanding of life and death'.<sup>49</sup> This 'makes no moral sense' it appears, less because we cannot imagine any deliberative encounter between ourselves and genuine mediaeval Christians, but rather because their moral understandings simply differ from ours, precluding a common ground from which to

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<sup>47</sup> 'Unless we can construct a neutral starting point from which many different and possibly legitimate moral cultures might develop, we can't construct a proceduralist minimum. But there is no such starting point.' Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, p.14.

<sup>48</sup> Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, p.4.

<sup>49</sup> Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, p.30.



make a sound moral judgement.<sup>50</sup> This is evident from his consideration of the Chinese idea of democracy: 'I would explain, as best I could, my own views about democracy. But I would try to avoid the missionising tone... Since I know very little about their society I cannot foist upon the Chinese this or that set of rights - certainly not my preferred set.'<sup>51</sup>

Walzer's conception of inter-cultural encounters might be described as 'anthropological'. It is one in which information is perhaps exchanged, but argument is scrupulously avoided for fear of ethnocentrically imposing our views on others. In the absence of any common ground, what else could argument be other than imposition? There is, in a sense, a contrast with Rorty here: Rorty expresses frustration with the anti-ethnocentrism of anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, as this view, taken to its logical conclusion, would undermine any basis for judgement whatsoever. Having said that, it is doubtful if Rorty would wish to simply 'impose' his views on others, for while there is no common ground, and he cannot appeal to values like impartiality to regulate his dealings with others, he would presumably invoke the 'principle' of avoidance of cruelty to restrain intercultural encounters, just as it limits the public use of redescription.

Walzer, while he will allow that thin moral principles may govern relations between states, sees them as weak as well as thin in the sense of 'general', and says that while we may feel solidarity with others, in different political communities, this should not extend to interference in their affairs. While organisations like Amnesty International, whose campaigns are premised on universalist ideas such as 'human rights', are deemed praiseworthy, they must 'restrain whatever impulse their members have to impose a complete set of moral principles across the globe.'<sup>52</sup> What we see here is a normative pluralism of a particular relativist variety entwined with Walzer's

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<sup>50</sup> By 'genuine' I mean to suggest a contrast between Christians from the middle ages, and contemporary Christians who share their religious beliefs.

<sup>51</sup> Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, p.60.

<sup>52</sup> Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, p.49.

conceptual pluralism, much in the same way that Stanley and Wise combined the idea of respect with the idea of private meaning.

Walzer not only thinks that each political community has its own distinctive set of social meanings from which it derives its morality, but that the attempt to construct general, thin, principles which might be used to judge local moralities is often a cover for an imperialist attempt to impose one's views on another. Criticising another community's practices in the name of general moral principles is not simply mistaken, but unjustifiable. It is not so much an exercise in social criticism, but rather an effort at 'conversion and conquest: the total replacement of the society from which the critic has detached himself with some (imagined or actual) other.'<sup>53</sup> It is, Walzer says, a 'morally unattractive form of social criticism and not one whose 'objectivity' we should admire.'<sup>54</sup>

This worry about the propensity of a social criticism which relies on general principles, to overlap the proper boundaries of respect for cultural plurality is manifested in another way in Walzer's theory of justice. Walzer argues against procedural accounts of justice that they do not account for the way that social goods have their own specific social meanings and that they must be distributed according to these. This introduces another sort of pluralism into the equation, for not only must we respect the boundaries between different political communities and their beliefs, on account of the plurality of meanings, within a given society each good must be distributed according to its own distributive principle, drawn from its particular meaning. We have a plurality of goods and of distributive principles and equality consists of keeping these 'spheres' apart, that is, of not seeking to regulate their distribution according to some general principle of what Walzer calls 'simple' equality. Monopolies on the distribution of some good would be acceptable then, provided that

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<sup>50</sup> Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism, p.52.

<sup>54</sup> Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism, p.52.

those who held that monopoly did not seek to convert it into a monopoly of some other good.

This is an unconvincing interpretation of the meaning of equality, given its insensitivity to monopoly. Its weakness points to the general weakness of the particularist link between hermeneutic situation and morality. In order to derive determinate moral principles from the practices of particular political communities, it is necessary to overlook pluralism within communities in much the same way as the attempt to set out a feminist standpoint required Hartsock to overlook differences between the outlooks of actual women. If we acknowledge that there is deep disagreement *within* such communities and not simply *between* them, then we must see that 'social meanings' do not speak with a single voice, providing a determinate set of moral principles for a given community.<sup>55</sup> As we saw in the earlier discussion of essential contestability, the plurality of meaning is at least as much a source of persistent disagreement as it is an expression of agreement. In the end, the normative preferences of the particularist covertly supply the missing consensus, and in Walzer's case this turns out to be a libertarian fear of 'statism' which operates to sustain the compromised egalitarianism of his conception of justice.<sup>56</sup>

A number of writers have drawn attention to the example of Northern Ireland in order to underline the implausibility of his belief in the efficacy of a social criticism

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<sup>55</sup> Seyla Benhabib notes that this particular style of 'situated' social criticism suffers from 'a kind of hermeneutic monism of meaning', the assumption namely that the narratives of our culture are so univocal and uncontroversial that in appealing to them one could simply be exempt from the task of evaluative, ideal-typical reconstruction. Social criticism needs philosophy precisely because the narratives of our cultures are so conflictual and irreconcilable that, even when one appeals to them, a certain ordering of one's normative priorities and a clarification of those principles in the name of which one speaks is unavoidable.' Benhabib 'Feminism and Postmodernism: an uneasy alliance,' in *Feminist Contentions*, S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell, and N. Fraser (London: Routledge, 1995), p.27.

<sup>56</sup> Walzer claims that 'simple equality' will give in to 'statism' as 'within their own spheres, as they are currently understood, these three [wealth, education, and power] tend to generate natural monopolies that can be repressed only if state power is itself dominant and if it is monopolised by officials committed to the repression [of monopoly].' Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, p.17.

based on shared traditions.<sup>57</sup> On one hand this example supports the general hermeneutic point that our identities and perspectives are constituted by particular traditions: in this case, individuals find themselves identified either as Catholic, Irish, Nationalists, or as Protestant, British, Unionists, and while individuals are free to reinterpret or repudiate aspects of these constellations of identity, this entails a host of complicated relations with others, from family and friends to the community at large, and of course, the state.<sup>58</sup> Even where individuals choose to repudiate features of the identity that they are born into, this repudiation will be complicated by the fact that others may not recognise this repositioning, underlining another feature of our finitude, in hermeneutic terms, namely, the way that previous identifications cannot be simply erased, but can only be reconfigured.<sup>59</sup>

The difficulty posed by this example for communitarian social criticism is that while it underlines the importance of understanding the way in which one's situation shapes one's self-understanding and positions one in relation to others, it also shows how empty the appeal to shared tradition is in a political context characterised by pluralism. This is clearly evident in the case of the North of Ireland, where the two 'communities' are effectively divided by a 'shared' history of colonial rule, in which the traditions of each sustain conflict with the other.<sup>60</sup> The political aims derived from each tradition, union with the Republic, on one hand, or continued union with the UK, on the other, cannot both be satisfied, and no solution may be expected from more

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<sup>57</sup> See Shane O'Neill, *Impartiality in Context*, (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1997). Gerard Delanty, 'Habermas and post-national identity: theoretical perspectives on the conflict in Northern Ireland,' *Irish Political Studies* 11 (1996), pp. 20-29.

<sup>58</sup> On the complexity of these identifications see Fionnuala O'Connor *In Search of a State*, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1993). Andy Pollak (ed.) *A Citizen's Inquiry: the Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland*, (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993). M. Crozier (ed.) *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland*, (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1990). Edna Longley (ed.) *Culture in Ireland: division or diversity?* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1991).

<sup>59</sup> Fair Employment legislation in Northern Ireland requires the monitoring of the 'perceived' religious affiliation of job applicants. One can cease to identify oneself with a particular religious organisation, but it does not follow that one will cease to be identified with it by others.

<sup>60</sup> The language of 'community' is far from neutral in this context.

'authentic' interpretations of each tradition. Instead, these traditions and identities must be revised in certain ways, if a just accommodation between Nationalists and Unionists is to be achieved. It is argued, *pace* Walzer, that impartial justice, not authenticity, can provide the outlines of such an accommodation.<sup>61</sup>

The idea that meaning is socially and historically variable does follow from the rejection of foundationalism, but the connection of meaning to public practices does not warrant the assumption that meaning within societies will be univocal, but on the contrary it suggests that meanings will tend to be plural within languages: they form clusters characterised by family resemblances. Walzer's view, by contrast, appears to assume the reinstatement of a certain foundationalism with respect to language at the level of particular linguistic/political communities. Within these, there are meanings which are essential, or basic, in direct opposition to the Wittgensteinian view. Secondly, the idea that our beliefs are indeed shaped by the traditions in which we find ourselves situated does not require us to adopt a traditionalist standpoint towards these beliefs, namely, one which requires no further justification for our continuing to hold a belief other than that it is 'ours'. The traditionalism of the particularist understanding of hermeneutic situation, inasmuch as it overlooks the plurality of meaning within languages and the possibility of alternative standpoints with respect to institutionalised belief, exhibits a failure to be sufficiently pluralist with respect to meaning and situation.

### *Situation and Impartiality.*

Rorty and Walzer are wrong to draw particularist conclusions from the pluralist premises of the hermeneutic idea of situation. This notion of situation is equally compatible with universalist morality and impartiality in particular. Firstly, what do we

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<sup>61</sup> See Shane O'Neill, *Impartiality in Context*.

understand by universalist morality? The views set out above seem to rely on the idea that we have no presuppositionless and therefore universally acceptable foundation on which we could rest a deductive account of our moral principles. The only response to this, the argument goes, is to embrace 'pluralism' and recognise that morality will inevitably rely on particular cultural assumptions and that it will only be intelligible within the confines of the particular traditions and values of the culture in which it is found. If universalist morality did rely simply on the assumption that some proposition on value could be demonstrated to be fundamental, such that it must receive universal assent, then the conceptually pluralist, hermeneutic view would certainly be incompatible with it. However, universalism need not be identified with foundationalism, and consequently it does not fail because foundationalism is untenable. Doubtless, many universalists have been foundationalists, today, however, many take a more modest view, recognising the pluralism that must come with the rejection of foundationalism, and acknowledging, as a foundationalist could not, that reasonable people may disagree on their deepest moral commitments. If universalism does not entail a belief that there is or ought to be universal consensus on values and principle, what does it consist in?

Onora O'Neill sets out three senses in which morality may be universalist. Firstly, universalist morality is critical in its outlook, in contrast to the traditionalist attitude of moral particularism.<sup>62</sup> Instead of regarding morality as a codification or distillation of the practices of a given community, it aspires to criticise those practices and not simply on the basis of a more accurate interpretation of those practices. The latter is the basis on which Walzer's social criticism proceeds, but a universalist morality proceeds rather by asking whether practices are morally *justified*, rather than whether they are *authentic*.

Secondly, universalist morality is generally understood to be cosmopolitan in some way, that is, it recognises obligations to persons outside one's particular region,

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<sup>62</sup> O'Neill, Towards Justice and Virtue.

ethnicity or state, simply in virtue of their being human beings. Some particularisms may prefer to deny that there are any such obligations while others simply grant greater weight to obligations to members of one's own group, and perhaps only on some issues. Rorty would seem to adopt a cosmopolitan outlook, which he justifies in terms of a particular interpretation of the universalist traditions of liberal democracies. This is not a small point: we should not underestimate the value of being able to show traditionalists that they have misinterpreted their traditions, and that these traditions enjoin a more cosmopolitan outlook than they had supposed.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, particularist cosmopolitanism is hardly secure, as on this view, cosmopolitanism is not itself a moral requirement as much as it is a product of chance, which is to say, historical accident, lacking independent moral justification.

The final sense in which a moral theory may be universalist is in the minimal sense in which moral principles are taken to apply universally, i.e. without exception, within a given domain. For example: 'Cast your vote on election day', is a universal principle, but holds only for those who have a vote.<sup>64</sup> This sense of universalism is distinct from the sense in which universalism is cosmopolitan, as it refers only to the form of principles, and not to the scope of the domains in which they might apply. In sum, the idea of universalist morality has content even when it is distinguished from claims about universal foundations for morality, and this content does not rely upon the idea of such foundations. Insofar as it is critical, universalist morality will be impartial, and insofar as it is cosmopolitan, it will rest on a commitment to equality. Both of these commitments are compatible with the recognition of pluralism which follows from the rejection of foundationalism.

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<sup>63</sup> See for example Kevin Whelan's recovery of Irish republicanism's anti-clerical, Enlightenment character from Catholic, Nationalist tradition. This also has implications for the identification of Protestantism with Orangeism, an essentially reactionary tradition which came into being, not after the Glorious Revolution, but after the failure of the rising in 1798, a rising led chiefly by Protestant radicals. Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996).

<sup>64</sup> O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, p.75.

On a constructivist view of morality, we do not 'find' principles, but rather *construct* them by adopting a procedural test for our maxims. Typically this takes the form of a contractualism: valid moral principles are those which are intelligible to others and which may be adopted or reasonably rejected by them. This proceduralism is acknowledged by its proponents to rely upon certain presuppositions, that is, it is not presented in a foundationalist manner.<sup>65</sup> The substantive moral commitment behind the contractarian device, which prescribes justification to others, is the commitment to equality, while certain minimal ontological assumptions also figure in the construction of the principles.

In Onora O'Neill's account these include: 'plurality', 'connection' and 'finitude'.<sup>66</sup> These assumptions underlie our moral deliberations in that we assume first that there are others whom our actions may affect; that actors are connected in a variety of ways to each other, for example, causally; and that the powers of moral agents are finite in certain ways. The way in which non-moral assumptions about the world figure in moral deliberations is often overlooked, but as was mentioned in Chapter Two in the case of causality and responsibility, moral and non-moral assumptions are connected and this connection is often of central importance. Indeed, the central concern of this thesis is to determine the nature of the connection between ontological assumptions about context and situation and critical morality. Constructivism differs from other post-foundationalist accounts of morality in that built into the procedure is the idea that we must justify ourselves to others, and this can be extended to the justification of the

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<sup>65</sup> See Brian Barry: 'Clearly I have introduced substantive moral ideas in the course of talking about what could be reasonably be rejected. Since I have already said that nothing can be expected from the bare notion of rationality itself, I am not in the least embarrassed by recognising that this is so. The underlying assumption here is that claims to special advantages based simply upon membership of a certain bloodline, ethnic group or race are too transparently self-serving to form a basis of agreement that others can seriously be asked to assent to. More deeply, the whole idea that we should seek the agreement of everybody rests on a fundamental commitment to the equality of all human beings.' Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), p.8. Rawls observes that 'Justice as fairness is not procedurally neutral. Clearly its principles of justice are substantive and express far more than procedural values, and so do its political conception of society and person, which are represented in the original position. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p.192.

<sup>66</sup> O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, pp.100-6.



assumptions underlying the construction of those procedures. In this way the recognition of pluralism which distinguishes foundationalist and post-foundationalist morality is reconciled with the critical demand that we provide justifications for our beliefs. The clash between moral particularists and 'universalists' is not so much over foundationalism, as over the possibility of providing justifications for moral principles and perhaps, to a lesser extent, over the cosmopolitan scope of morality. In what follows, I will defend the idea that recognition of pluralism and of situation is in fact compatible with a critical, impartial, morality and argue that it is moral *particularism* which fails to be sufficiently pluralist.

The moral particularism of Rorty and Walzer fails because while it purports to be anti-foundationalist, it still aspires to an overly unified conception of the world. It simply fails to be pluralist enough in its treatment of situation, and for this reason, where it is 'pluralist', it is pluralist in the wrong ways. To see how this is so, we need to recall Thomas Nagel's idea that there is an irreducible tension between objective and subjective descriptions of the world, a tension which cannot be diminished by privileging either of these possible ways of viewing the world. Objective descriptions of the world are important insofar as they play a significant role in realist views of the world and also within a variety of ethical views, which rely on ideas about the objectivity of value and/or the impersonality of moral principles. Objective views, whether employed in ethics or in the pursuit of knowledge, are distinguished by the fact that they involve an essentially reflective attitude to oneself, i.e. in adopting an 'objective' or reflective stance one describes oneself in the third person, as one of the contents of the world one describes.<sup>67</sup> The fact that it is oneself doing the describing and that for this reason any objective description will unavoidably have a blind spot in a sense, is one reason why objective descriptions cannot, according to Nagel, aspire to be absolute.

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<sup>67</sup> As Paul Ricoeur notes, this idea is contained within the idea of self-hood itself. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Kathleen Blamey (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Our problem is to determine how, and in what contexts, we can make use of objective and subjective descriptions. Nagel warns of the danger of over-objectification and repeatedly insists that both with respect to knowledge and to ethics, we must make room for the subjective view. One reason for this is that objectivity is so closely related to scepticism and to nihilism.<sup>68</sup> It is easy to slip from the thought that the world is independent of how it appears to us (the objective view) to the thought that all of our views about it could be mistaken and that we could never tell if this was the case. Similarly, an objective viewpoint in ethics may lead us from the idea that there are impersonal values, or things valuable in themselves independently of our valuing them, to the idea that this is in fact an illusion, and that there are no such values, save for those 'created' by individuals or cultures, because, from an objective view, there seems to be no other way to explain the profusion of values we are confronted with.<sup>69</sup>

This is precisely what goes wrong with the particularist reading of hermeneutic situation: it is a view of situation which effectively privileges a particular objective, socio-historical, description of our place in the world. This is a socio-historical objectivity in contrast to the objectivity of physicalism, but it has the same impact as that particular reductive view with respect to morality. Instead of treating the world as fundamentally physical, this view takes a socio-historical description of morality to be fundamental, in the sense that morality is revealed as 'really' no more than a collection of social practices. As Rorty says of ethical objectivity, this is 'really' no more than a desire for the survival of our own particular community. General principles and impersonal values are debunked by this objective view as the illusions of particular communities.

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<sup>68</sup> As Nagel says, 'Nothing has any objective value, because objectively nothing matters at all. If we push the claims of objective detachment to their logical conclusion, and survey the world from a standpoint completely detached from all interests, we discover there is nothing - no values left of any kind: things can be said to matter at all only to individuals within the world. The result is objective nihilism.' Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p.146.

<sup>69</sup> For the connection of objectivity and nihilism see Nietzsche's argument about the way that Christianity's own 'will to truth' undermined it. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, (1887) Keith Ansell-Pearson (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

One response to the 'truth' about morality, which this objective view reveals, would be to adopt a self-conscious nihilism like that of Nietzsche, who responds to the idea that values are not 'found' in the world with the idea of the 'overman', who self-consciously 'creates' value. Rorty toys with this idea under the heading of 'ironism' but in the end retreats from it and, like Walzer, opts instead to try to salvage morality by presenting a view of it which seeks to lessen the tension between the view from 'inside', which is to say, the subjective view of the moral subject who believes there are such things as truth and morality, and the objective, reflective, view which purports to expose these as illusions as more mere social products. The adaptation of the subjective, in this case, moral, point of view, to the objective nihilist point of view is effected by trying to make the belief that morality is simply a social institution, part of the moral subject's first order beliefs about morality. What moral particularists urge us to do is to replace the idea that 'x is right' with the idea that 'x is right for us'. The objective point of view reveals a cacophony of ethical beliefs in the world, but we can cope with this by particularising morality, saving it by limiting its scope to particular communities.

This attempt to adapt a 'subjective', in this case, moral, outlook to a socio-historical objectivity is a prime example of the danger of privileging one range of description over another. Firstly, no range of description can be demonstrated to be more fundamental than any other without presupposing that which one purports to explain: the special relationship between the world and the particular range of description in question. For this reason, we cannot give particularising socio-historical descriptions primacy over other ranges of description, in this case both generalising and normative descriptions. There is no good reason why we cannot employ generalising descriptions to cultures and societies in order to reveal identities and similarities.<sup>70</sup> For this reason, a blanket particularism with respect to moral norms such

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<sup>70</sup> The description of social practices is itself open to both behaviourist and normative interpretations. See above, for the difference between taking social practices as the basis for induction or in terms of normative constraint.

as that set out by Walzer, which treats 'thick' description as primary, and 'thin' as derivative, is wholly arbitrary. There is no conceptual barrier to redescribing 'thick' morality in 'thin' universalist ways.

Secondly, not only does this view privilege objective description it does so in a way which contradicts the 'traditionalist' outlook of moral particularism. To adopt a reconciliation between objective and subjective descriptions proposed by Rorty and Walzer, we should have to engage in a massive revision of concepts like truth, morality and justification. As Hilary Putnam points out, Rorty's interpretation of these flatly contradicts our current usage. We do not think we are simply 'commending' a belief when we say that it is 'true', nor do we think that justification is really just a question of communal agreement. On the contrary, we think that if a belief is justified, then it remains so in the face of communal disagreement. If we were to adopt a particularist view of these concepts, we should effectively be engaged in revising or simply replacing them with new ones, and this contradicts that particularist claim to leave in place the social meanings which we find in the communities we find ourselves in. Many, although regrettably not all, people in the 'rich North Atlantic democracies' to which Rorty refers happen to subscribe to universalistic moralities, the form and content of which simply resist the reduction which particularists urge. In urging us to accept a reductive, particularist view of truth and morality, particularists contradict their own express view of the 'communal' character of ideas like truth and morality.

Walzer simply does not see this problem, but Rorty struggles with it, insofar as he is unable to decide whether to press home a poetic, nihilist view of truth and morality, the view which urges us to replace the idea of discovery with that of 'making', or to try to save our concepts of truth morality and justification by providing them with a communitarian foundation. Rorty tries to resolve the conflict between these two possible responses to the anti-foundationalism by means of the distinction between public and private. On one hand, he is drawn to the view that we could come to have an explicitly ironic, anti-foundationalist public culture, much as we have come to have an largely secular public culture, inconceivable as this must have seemed to previous

ages.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, however, he doubts whether our public culture, at least a liberal public culture, could be sustained by a thoroughgoing nihilism, and argues that we must restrain ironism by confining it to the private sphere.<sup>72</sup> We have already seen that there is no support for the 'principle' he uses to draw this distinction to be had from our existing concept of cruelty, but it can have still less support from a nihilist, ironic point of view, for from this view the vocabulary of morality which would enjoin restraint is no more authoritative than any other. We simply could not be ironists in private, but communitarians in public. Rorty canvasses a second way to resolve the conflict between the ironic and the traditionalist interpretations of anti-foundationalism, one which explicitly parts company with liberal egalitarian politics, namely, that the public culture could be insulated from the corrosive nihilism of the ironic view if this outlook were to be confined to a class of intellectuals, leaving the general public to adopt a foundationalist view of their morality.<sup>73</sup> These contortions underline the truth of Nagel's observation that the tension between subjective and objective descriptions of the world is often experienced as a tension within oneself, as it is 'I' who describes the world in each case, occupying, in this case, the standpoint of ironist and communitarian moralist. The fact that the tension between these views appears within the subject is, in turn, one of the reasons why the pressure to reconcile these in some way is so strong.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> He notes that 'once upon a time atheism too was the exclusive property of intellectuals.' Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.87.

<sup>72</sup> 'But even if I am right in thinking that a liberal culture whose public rhetoric is nominalist and historicist is both possible and desirable, I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is ironist. I cannot imagine a culture which socialised its own youth in such a way as to make them seem continually dubious about their own process of socialisation. Irony seems inherently a private matter.' Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.87.

<sup>73</sup> 'In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the non-intellectuals would not. The latter would, however, be commonsensically nominalist and historicist.' Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p.87.

<sup>74</sup> 'The trouble is that the two attitudes have to coexist in a single person who is actually leading the life towards which he is simultaneously engaged and detached. This person does not occupy a third standpoint from which he can make two relativized judgements about his life. If all he had were two relativized judgements, they would leave him with no attitude toward his life at all - only information about the appropriate attitude from two points of view, neither of which was his. But in fact he occupies both of them and his attitudes derive from them both.' Nagel, The View from Nowhere, p.216.

The view set out above, by contrast, is one which does not seek to reduce the tension between objective and subjective views with respect to truth and morality by adapting the latter to a relativist, nihilist objective view of particularism. This view fails because of its foundationalist attitude to such objective description. Although I have criticised the privilege accorded to socio-historical objectivity it is not the case that on my view morality is to be regarded as simply 'subjective'. On the contrary, the assumption that there are objectively right and wrong answers plays a central role *within* morality. This objectivity is not the same as the objectivity of the socio-historical viewpoint. The latter is objective with respect to the 'subjective' point of view of the moral agent insofar as it is an objective view with respect to morality *per se*. The objectivity of impersonal, or impartial, morality is, by contrast, an objective view adopted from *within* morality, a view adopted from *within* the perspective of the moral subject. While the first sort of objectivity encourages a relativist or nihilist view of morality, the latter sort of objectivity assumes that there are impersonal values and reasons to be moral, while emphasising the importance of describing our own values, projects and principles in a third personal way in order to judge them impartially. The aim of this objectivity is not to suspend the force of morality, but only to suspend the potential force of the 'mineness' of my moral beliefs.

The objection to the idea that ethics requires 'a detachment from particular perspectives and transcendence of one's time and place' is founded on the idea that this requires the impossible insofar as we are situated beings.<sup>75</sup> The demand that we transcend the context that we find ourselves in and adopt a 'view from nowhere', a 'God's eye view' in order to make moral judgements simply does not make sense, given the sort of beings we are, located in particular cultures with particular histories, locations which render our beliefs necessarily perspectival. The objective view which reveals that moralities are specific to particular communities is what compels us to recognise that morality and social criticism cannot be thought of in terms of the

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<sup>75</sup> Nagel, The View from Nowhere, p.187.

detachment of the social critic, but rather in terms of the connectedness of that critic to the community and its particular values and traditions. The fact that an objective description of morality plays a role in this argument should make us suspicious of the claim that detachment, which is to say, the capacity to offer objective, third-personal, descriptions, within morality is not possible, for if we can employ objective descriptions in one way, why can we not employ them in the other?

In fact, a commitment to an impersonal or impartial morality, does not require us to deny that we are situated, finite beings, nor does it rely on an absolute description of the world, as Walzer, for example, suggests. Insofar as one recognises that an objective description of the world, one that includes one's subjective view within it, is just one possible description and even just one possible 'objective' description, then the idea that morality requires objective descriptions cannot be identified with any foundational claim to present an absolute conception of the world. Clearly, this is the case with respect to an objective, moral description of oneself and one's values and projects, in which one figures as just one more moral agent, with his or her own values and projects. This view excludes, for example, physicalist or socio-historical descriptions which adopt a cultural stance toward morality, treating it as epiphenomenal or illusory. It also exists in an uneasy relationship with the subjective view, from which one emphasises the 'mineness' of one's values and projects in contrast to the detached, third person description one offers from the objective standpoint. Clearly it is a limited description, consistent with the conceptual pluralism upon which hermeneutics is based.

Within impartial conceptions of morality, such as consequentialism, for example, one is motivated to adopt such a stance, such a description of oneself and one's values in order to eliminate 'mineness', partiality with respect to the realisation of one's own goals, and such descriptions do this by placing one's projects within the world alongside those of others so that one can arrive at an impersonal, impartial, judgement as to which one ought to further. For instance, we might judge that projects hindered by a lack of basic goods such as freedom should be furthered in preference to

those which required the supply of luxuries such as plover's eggs, irrespective of which of these projects happens to be one's own. The device of objective description only helps to drop the 'mineness' of beliefs and goals out of the picture in making such judgements, that is to say, impartial moral judgements only require us to exclude reasons of the form 'because x is *mine*' from our judgements.<sup>76</sup>

The very limited purpose of the device of impersonal description in morality should make it clear why insisting that such descriptive possibilities are open to us is not tantamount to denying pluralism or situation. Obviously, making any sort of judgement presupposes that one possesses some beliefs, from metaphysical assumptions about the nature of objects through epistemological beliefs about what counts as 'evidence', 'causality' etc., down to moral beliefs, for example, that one ought to adopt an impartial view in at least some of our moral judgements. All of these remain in place when one sets out to engage in impartial moral deliberation. Our impersonal judgements are subject to all the usual flaws to which any judgement is subject: not only faulty reasoning, but failures to recognise alternative and sometimes essentially contestable characterisations of the matter at hand. Impersonality is no guarantee of infallibility. Recognition of our finite nature, the awareness that our conceptual repertoire and our beliefs about the relations pertaining between different regions of it have been shaped by particular traditions, particular ways of posing problems, or characterising objects, can actually help us to make better judgements insofar as we will be prepared to accept challenges on these grounds. How we respond to such challenges depends on the precise character of the challenge of course: in some cases we may, by employing generalising descriptions, come to an agreement that value x, as an instance of y, should outweigh z, while in other cases we may find no agreement. Even here, we may continue to adopt an impartial stance, insofar as we

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<sup>76</sup> I take no stand here on the sort of things that we might make impartial judgements about, that is, goods of various sorts to be distributed, or whether impartial judgements should play a role in personal relations, political deliberations, or both.



may then seek a compromise rather than adopt the view that we should simply force through our favoured option simply because it is our own

A particularist might still object, however, that insofar as one unavoidably relies upon one's current beliefs in deliberation, the device of impersonal description will fail to produce an impartial judgement. As one's beliefs lack a universally acknowledged foundation, one's justifications must terminate in beliefs which one holds simply because of one's socialisation into the particular society in which one is situated, and which cannot be further justified without circularity. As such any judgement will simply amount to an affirmation of a particular, culturally specific, outlook and the idea of impartiality will be revealed to be empty in the last analysis.

This objection rests on a mistake about justification, however. Certainly, it is the case that justification relies upon beliefs one actually holds, and it is also true that in any given stretch of reasoning, we will be unable to provide universally acknowledged foundations for our more basic beliefs. Our justifications will terminate in beliefs which cannot be further justified and whose acquisition can only be explained in terms of socialisation. From the external, socio-historical position, we will be impressed by the fact that we can explain how we came to hold these beliefs, while from the internal standpoint of the moral reasoner, we will be uneasy on account of our inability to provide non-circular justifications for these beliefs. We should prefer to regard our holding a particular set of beliefs as the outcome of a process of justification, and not simply as the outcome of a process of socialisation. It would be tempting to try to remove this unease by adopting a parochial attitude to these beliefs, and treating the facts about their acquisition as themselves providing a justification, as Rorty does by insisting that there is no basis for distinguishing between justified acquisition of beliefs and acquisition by external causes. As we saw, this entails an unwarranted revision of the concept of justification. We can, however, choose to 'manage' the tension between the demand for justification and the realisation that any justification will have to be circular, by adopting instead a fallibilist attitude to these beliefs. On this view we do not attempt to supply culturally specific foundations for

our higher order beliefs, but rather resolve to adopt an impersonal attitude to these too, where necessary, and recognising that they stand in need of justification, we should remain open to revising them when offered reasons to do so.

This view makes sense on a certain, pragmatic, view of justification. On this view we replace the idea that we should have to justify our entire system of beliefs all at once, with the view that we should treat justification in a more pragmatic fashion, coping with each request for the justification of a part of our system of beliefs as it comes up. On the former view, which we might call foundational justification, we should be forced to conclude that none of our beliefs were justified if we could not find an indubitable premise for our whole system, while on the latter view, justification is localised in such a way that we can accept reasons for retaining or rejecting any particular element of our system of beliefs, because in any particular deliberation, other beliefs are left in the background to do the work of justification. If we think about justification in this piecemeal, pragmatic fashion, then we can see how we can make sense of the fallibilist resolution to adopt, where necessary, an impersonal attitude to beliefs which, in other instances, do the work of justification themselves. If we can shift the burden of justification around the different elements of our system of belief in a pragmatic fashion then we can see how we could accept reasons acceptable within that system for dislodging even those beliefs which are normally embedded deeply in that system.<sup>77</sup> To the extent that this is possible, we need not accept the parochial 'solution' to the problem of foundations: no belief is held to be exempt from potential challenge. It is conceivable that we could totally revise our complete set of beliefs, offering justifications at every step of the way, and arrive at a wholly new set of beliefs at the end of this process.

Walzer and Rorty ultimately arrive, by slightly different routes, at a model of the encounter with others which resembles that which was derived from the epistemic

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<sup>77</sup> See Charles Larmore, 'Tradition, objectivity, and hermeneutics,' in Brice R. Wachterhauser (ed.) Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp.147-67.

conception of situation, a model in which respect for others is taken to require of us a respect for their beliefs. On this model, we can understand others, but we have no ground for criticising them, for in the absence of shared meanings or values, this would amount to no more than imposition. Rorty's 'anti-anti ethnocentrism' seems to suggest that he would be less hesitant to make judgements about the beliefs and practices of others, but this tendency is restrained by the idea that it is cruel to challenge others' self descriptions, so that in the end, he is at one with Walzer in arguing for placing strict limits upon our engagement with differently situated others.

This attitude is in marked contrast with the outlook recommended by Gadamer, who suggests that, far from embodying respect, this 'anthropological' stance towards differently situated others is ethically undesirable. The guiding idea here is that of 'openness', and in the form of the hermeneutic 'experience', an 'experience of truth'. For Gadamer the 'experienced' person is someone who is 'radically undogmatic', who is open to new and unexpected experiences. To be open then is to take one's interlocutors 'seriously', which is to say, to regard them as equals: whose discourse has as much a *prima facie* claim to truth as one's own. The hermeneutic conversation as conceived by Gadamer is thus distinct from the poetic individualism proposed by Rorty, for not only is it concerned with truth, but also with a model of dialogue in which interlocutors must ideally take each other 'seriously'.<sup>78</sup> According to Gadamer, the Romantics, while apparently respecting the otherness of those they interpreted, failed to reflect upon their own horizon and place it in question in the course of the hermeneutic conversation. This is not a true conversation in Gadamer's eyes but instead, he says, it resembles an oral examination, or a conversation between doctor and patient. What goes wrong here, is that the interpreter has 'withdrawn from the situation of trying to reach agreement. He himself cannot be reached'.<sup>79</sup> The particularist, on this account has suspended the other's claim to truth and to this extent

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<sup>78</sup> James Risser emphasises the outward-looking character of Gadamer's hermeneutics in Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other.

<sup>79</sup> Gadamer, Truth and Method, p.270.

his outlook embodies what Gadamer calls the prejudice of modernity, the view that we can learn nothing from the past. While this has a rather conservative ring to it, it is clear that the same criticism can be applied to the parochialism of communitarian particularism in its treatment of culturally distinct others. The counterpart of the enlightened prejudice which Gadamer complains of is simply the ethnocentric belief that 'our ways are best'.

My argument in this chapter does not answer questions about the relation of impartial moral requirements to one's personal projects, in the sense that the requirement to live 'right', to live according to impartial principles, may conflict with the desire to live 'well', as Nagel puts it. Nor does it explain why we ought to adopt an impersonal stance in our dealings with others. I will say more about these issues in the concluding chapter. What this does answer, however, is the ontological or conceptual objection to impartiality, the objection that impartiality conflicts with the fact that we are all situated in particular cultures and communities with particular traditions and values and that therefore we cannot transcend our situation in order to arrive at some Archimedean point from which we could make truly impartial judgements. The view set out here is one of impartial morality stripped of such metaphysical pretensions. Just as we have no grounds for privileging socio-historical descriptions of ourselves, so also, we have no grounds for privileging a purely personal, or traditionalist outlook when we engage in moral deliberation. Objective descriptions are possible, and can be offered without the pretence that one is suddenly lifted out of one's situation whenever one sets out to employ such descriptions. The fact that one's situation may affect one's judgements should not lead us to conclude that it makes no sense to adopt an impartial moral view: we may not be infallible, but that does not mean that we ought to be parochial.

With this Chapter, the account of context, situation and interpretation is complete. The hermeneutic understanding of situation builds upon the conceptual pluralism set out in Chapter Two and the public account of meaning set out in Chapter

Three. It adds to these the idea that our conceptual schemes have the historical character of social institutions. To be situated in a context is to come to orient oneself in a world characterised by the pre-existence of languages and problematics. This view can explain the plurality of perspectives and identities present within and across societies, but avoids the claims to self-transparency and authority which characterised the epistemic understanding of situation. As such, it is hospitable to the redemptive aims of social criticism.

What remains is to determine the role which an interpretive social criticism can play within a deliberative politics governed by the norm of impartiality. First, however, we shall have to confront the radical social criticism of Marx and Foucault. Unlike the community-oriented criticism of Walzer, these critics contextualise ideas in order to transform social relations. While their emphasis on the way in which power relations play a part in the constitution of traditions and identities is salutary, it will be argued that their reductive attitude to context excludes the normative criticism of unequal power relations. Given the pluralist account of contextualisation set out in Chapter Two, this, it will be argued, is unwarranted and self-defeating. An effective social criticism will be sensitive to the effects of power, but it will also require the normative resources to criticise the problems identified by contextualisation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RADICAL SOCIAL CRITICISM

Radical social criticism differs from the communitarian social criticism proposed by Walzer in that while it acknowledges the fact that we are all situated in particular social and political contexts, it chooses to emphasise the way in which unequal power relations are a fundamental aspect of our context. The opacity that comes with situation: the idea that our self-understandings are mediated by public languages and institutionalised interpretations and problematics, is not so innocent as Walzer would have us believe for it can mean that relations of domination can come to shape our perspectives and identities in ways which we do not suspect. Radical social criticism is thus suspicious of the appearance of consensus, and unwilling to endorse tradition and the hermeneutics of authenticity proposed by communitarians. Instead, radical social criticism aims at revealing and reversing the operations of power which serve to shape our self-understandings.

The Marxist tradition has produced a style of social criticism conceived as 'ideology-critique' which aims at exposing the way that class-divided society conceals its alienating effects from those caught up in it.<sup>1</sup> Ideology critique serves a revolutionary politics the goal of which is a social revolution that will ultimately abolish class domination and class identities altogether. In this way, it aims to emancipate us from the social antagonisms that characterise our existing situation. This conception of social criticism has largely been superseded in recent years by an

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<sup>1</sup> For Marxist work in this area see Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970); Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, (1922) (London: Merlin, 1971); T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (London: Routledge, 1994) and with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (1944) (London: Verso, 1979); Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1972); Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, (London: Abacus, 1974), *Eros and Civilisation*, (1956) (London: Ark, 1987), *An Essay on Liberation*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972). On the place of these works within the larger Marxist tradition see J. G. Merquior, *Western Marxism*, (London: Paladin, 1986); Tom Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School*, (London: Tavistock, 1984); Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, (London: Heinemann, 1973).

alternative model of social criticism derived from the work of Michel Foucault.<sup>2</sup> Foucauldian social criticism, or 'genealogy', aims at the critique of identities *per se*, seeing these as the effects of power. This project has been detached from Marxism's revolutionary politics, as the idea of eliminating antagonisms and the identities which make them possible is no longer regarded as feasible or desirable. Instead, genealogy finds its home in a conception of politics as a realm of ineliminable conflict, in which identities and perspectives are continually open to contest and reconfiguration. Their differences may be less important, however, than what they have in common.

The virtue of ideology-critique and genealogy is that, in their different ways, they adopt a critical attitude to tradition and identity. In contrast to those who appeal to contextual considerations in order to strengthen demands for the recognition and respect of identities and perspectives, radical social criticism emphasises the ways in which these call for transformation. Where differences simply reflect class or gender inequality, they are not worthy of respect. The difficulty with both Marxist and Foucauldian models of criticism, however, is that they each rest on a particular objective view of moral and epistemic concepts which present these in strictly socio-historical terms as the products of particular social relations. In each case, the result is an attitude to politics that has no place for deliberation. By taking up this external standpoint with respect to moral and epistemic argument, radical social critics adopt an implausibly reductive attitude to justification, which ultimately undermines social criticism itself. What grounds can we offer others for revising their identities and

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<sup>2</sup> See Foucault, The Order of Things, (1966), The Archaeology of Knowledge, Power/Knowledge, C. Gordon (ed.) (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), Discipline and Punish, (1975) (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1991), Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, D. F. Bouchard (ed.), The History of Sexuality vol. 1(1976) (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978), The Uses of Pleasure, The History of Sexuality vol. 2, (1984) (Harmondsworth:Penguin, 1985), The Care of the Self, The History of Sexuality vol.3, (1984) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), Politics, Philosophy, Culture, L. O. Kritzman (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1988). See also Mark Poster, Foucault, Marxism, and History, (Cambridge: Polity, 1984); McNay, Foucault: a critical introduction, (Cambridge: Polity, 1994); Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Hubert Dreyfus, 'Being and power: Heidegger and Foucault,' International Journal of Philosophical Studies 4 (1996), pp.1-16; Jurgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity; Nancy Fraser, 'Michel Foucault: a 'Young Conservative'?' in Michael Kelly (ed.) Critique and Power, (Cambridge MA: MIT, 1994), pp.125-210. David Hoy (ed.) Foucault: a critical reader, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

beliefs if our interpretive strategy presumes that truth and morality are nothing more than veils for manipulation? Social criticism which respects others as equals must proceed by offering them reasons for transforming their perspectives, and it cannot do this on the basis of a relativist attitude to truth and morality. The transformative potential of radical social criticism can only be realised if it is dissociated from the reductive outlook adopted by both Marx and Foucault.

### *Ideology Critique*

Marx views us as historical beings, differently situated with respect to our respective places in history. Our situation, as members of a society at a particular stage of historical development, sets certain limits to our possibilities for action:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.<sup>3</sup>

These circumstances are also characterised by class divisions, so that in any given society at a given stage of its history, individuals will find themselves situated in a particular social location in virtue of their role in that society's relations of production. This situation is taken to colour one's outlook in certain ways although while there are, on this view, distinct class situations and distinct class outlooks, the relations between the two is sufficiently loose that members of one class may adopt the outlook of the other. Indeed, Marx observes that the ideas of the dominant class will tend to be

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<sup>3</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *Collected Works* Vol. 11 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), p.103.



adopted by non-members in view of the control exerted by the dominant class over the ideological superstructure of society.<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of situation itself, one should note, is itself transitory on Marx's view, for with the abolition of private property, classes, and the perspectives that go with them, they will cease to exist. Marxist social criticism may be construed as a critique of the ideas of the ruling class, and as attempting to foster a set of beliefs in the dominated class which will more adequately reflect their interests. Having said this, there are considerable differences within Marxism as to the nature of this criticism and even as to whether Marxism is properly understood as a form of social criticism at all, in the sense that social criticism appeals to values and principles to justify transformation of belief.

Marxist social criticism could be said to centre on the idea that private property in general and bourgeois private property in particular is dehumanising in its effects, i.e. it alienates us all from our real human nature. The aim of Marxist social criticism is to expose these effects and to explain their origin in the institution of private property: 'Production does not simply produce man as a *commodity*, the *human commodity*, man in the role of commodity; it produces him in keeping with his role as a *mentally* and physically *dehumanised* being.'<sup>5</sup> Capitalist relations of production, Marx argues, are alienating in a variety of ways: they render the worker's products alien to him, in the sense that he becomes a slave to the product rather than finding meaning in it as an expression of his creativity; the activity of producing is alien as it not experienced as a creative process, but as a constraint upon the freedom of the producers; the worker is alienated from his fellow workers with whom he is placed in relations of conflict and competition; and he is alienated from himself, alienated from his essential human

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<sup>4</sup> 'What else does the history of ideas prove, than that the intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production has changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.' Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto, Collected Works Vol. 6 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), p.503.

<sup>5</sup> Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Collected Works Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p.284.

nature, which is that of a cooperative and creative creature.<sup>6</sup> Human beings on Marx's view are essentially creative, cooperative creatures, but under capitalism, this nature is distorted and turned against the worker, who finds that the basic human urge to transform the environment and in doing so, human needs themselves, becomes an 'alien power'.<sup>7</sup> The goal of history, is the overcoming of alienation and the realisation of a reconciled, unalienated human nature.<sup>8</sup>

Like other contextualisms, Marxism is premised on a critique of abstraction. The distortion of essentially human characteristics is fundamentally a matter of abstraction and Marxist social criticism proceeds by identifying these abstractions and confronting them with the model of an unalienated, undistorted human nature. Marx emphasises that this is a process at work in 'reality' as such, and not simply in the sphere of 'consciousness'. That is to say, capitalist relations of production do not simply represent people in distorted, abstract ways, but also treat them in these ways, ways which rely upon abstraction from their true nature. In this way, the critique of abstraction is not a critique of ideas, but of reality. For Marx, the point is not to interpret the world as philosophers have done, but rather to *change* it.<sup>9</sup>

As with other varieties of contextualism, the true view of humanity, the description which represents humanity as it is, in contrast to the distorting work of abstraction, is a socio-historical view, a view presented in the 'materialist conception of history'. Those categories which present human beings as social-historical creatures are absolute, providing the description upon which all other characterisations rest. The

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<sup>6</sup> Marx presents alienation from one's fellows prior to alienation from human nature, or 'species being'. Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p.274-7.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p.278.

<sup>8</sup> 'Communism is the *positive* transcendence of *private property* as *human self-estrangement*, and therefore the real *appropriation* of the *human essence* by and for man; communism therefore as return of man to himself as a *social*, ( i.e. human) being - a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development.' Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p.296.

<sup>9</sup> 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.' Marx, Theses on Feuerbach. Collected Works, Vol. 5 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), p.8.

favoured range of objects for Marxist contextualisation are societies, classes and institutions, and the favoured ranges of description are those socio-historical categories which serve to explain the relations between institutions. Within this view, economic institutions are thought to be basic, as Marx thinks that humans are basically animals engaged in fulfilling their material needs, but distinct from other animals in that they can transform the natural world and their own needs in so doing. The foundational character of the economic, and by implication, the categories which represent this, is neatly captured in Marx's idea of society as composed of an economic foundation upon which rests a superstructure of legal and political ideas, an idea he refers to as 'the guiding principle of my studies':

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

This view of the foundational character of economic activity with respect to other social institutions leads Marxist social criticism to regard alternative ways of conceiving the world as forms of abstraction which serve only to mystify, or misrepresent, the basic facts of the matter, It is worth noting that the critique of

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy. Introduction, Collected Works Vol. 29 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), p.262-3.

abstraction played a fundamental role in Marx's thought before he arrived at the characteristically 'Marxist' view that the course of historical development might be explained in terms of the development of economic institutions.<sup>11</sup> Hegel is already criticised for treating man *abstractly*, in terms of his consciousness, rather than as he truly is: a concrete 'sensuous' human being.<sup>12</sup> The idea that this concrete humanity is engaged first and foremost in transforming itself through economic activity comes later in Marx's intellectual development: the critique of abstraction, however, is basic.<sup>13</sup> The break with Hegel and with German Philosophy at large is motivated by the idea that Hegel is wrong to represent world history in terms of a process in which mind advances toward an absolute conception of the world, because mind, or consciousness, is simply an abstraction. By taking this abstraction as fundamental:

...the human character of nature and of the nature created by history -  
man's products - appears in the form that they are products of abstract

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<sup>11</sup> Marx summarises his conception of history as follows: 'This conception of history thus relies on expounding the real process of production - starting from the material production of life itself - and comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production, i.e., civil society in its various stages, as the basis of all history; describing it in its action as the state, and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality, etc., etc., arise from it and tracing the process of their formation from that basis; thus the whole thing can, of course be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another). It has not, like the idealist view of history, to look for a category in every period, but remains constantly on the real *ground* of history; it does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of idea from material practice, and accordingly it comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into 'self-consciousness' or transformation into 'apparitions', 'spectres', 'whimsies', etc. but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which give rise to this idealistic humbug; that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other kinds of theory.' Marx, German Ideology, Collected Works Vol. 5 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), p.53-4.

<sup>12</sup> 'The human character of nature and of the nature created by history - man's products - appears in the form that they are products of abstract mind and as such, therefore, phases of mind - thought entities.' Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p.352.

<sup>13</sup> 'abstraction comprehending itself as abstraction knows itself to be nothing: it must abandon itself to abstraction - and so it arrives at an entity which is its exact opposite - at nature' Marx continues: 'The absolute idea, the abstract idea, this whole idea which behaves in such a strange and bizarre way, and which has given the Hegelians such terrible headaches, is from beginning to end nothing else but *abstraction*.' Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pp.343-4.

mind and as such therefore, phases of mind. The *Phänomenologie* is, therefore, a hidden mystifying and still uncertain criticism.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the subject of history, of the whole process of alienation and reconciliation is 'real, corporeal man, *man* with his feet firmly on solid ground, man exhaling and inhaling all the true forces of nature.'<sup>15</sup>

The same notion of a concrete, corporeal humanity drives Marx to reject the religiously inspired criticism of the Young Hegelians as itself premised on an abstract, unhistorical, conception of humanity.<sup>16</sup> The critique of abstraction, also, significantly, leads Marx to criticise treatments of man as 'citizen', whether in Hegel's monarchical system, or equally, in the works of democratic reformers.<sup>17</sup> Political freedom is not real human freedom, because it can only be a limited, one-sided freedom insofar as the

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<sup>14</sup> Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p.323.

<sup>15</sup> Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p.336.

<sup>16</sup> He observes that 'German criticism has, right up to its latest efforts, never left the realm of philosophy. It by no means examines its general philosophic premises, but in fact all its problems originate in a definite philosophic system, that of Hegel. Not only in its answers, even in its questions there was a mystification... To begin with they took pure, unfalsified Hegelian categories such as 'substance' and 'self-consciousness', after they secularised these categories by giving them more profane names such as 'species', the 'unique', 'man', etc. The entire body of German philosophical criticism from Strauss to Stirner is confined to criticism of *religious* conceptions. The critics started from real religion and theology proper. What religious consciousness and religious conception are was subsequently defined in various ways. The advance consisted in including the allegedly dominant metaphysical, political, juridical, moral and other conceptions under the category of religious or theological conceptions; and similarly in declaring that political, juridical, moral consciousness was religious or theological consciousness, and that the political, juridical, moral man - 'Man' in the last resort - was religious.' Marx, The German Ideology, p.29.

<sup>17</sup> 'Finally, man as a member of civil society is held to be man in the proper sense, *homme* as distinct from *citoyen*, because he is man in his sensuous, individual *immediate* existence, whereas *political* man is only abstract artificial man, man as an *allegorical, juridical* person. The real man, is recognised only in the shape of the *egoistic* individual, the true man is recognised only in the shape of the *abstract citoyen*.... Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand to a member of civil society, the *egoistic, independent* individual, and, on the other to the *citizen*, a juridical person. Only when real, individual man reabsorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a species-being in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognised and organised his '*forces propre*' as social forces, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished.' Marx, On the Jewish Question, (1843) Collected Works. Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), pp.167-8. Here the twin abstractions of man as citizen and of man as the individual economic agent, the member of civil society are criticised.

political conception of man, as citizen, is itself only an abstract, one-sided view of man. 'Equality', is regarded by Marx as nothing more than a political category and for this reason is rejected by him as an abstraction.<sup>18</sup>

The critique of abstraction based on the materialist conception of history, a conception of humanity as historical, has important implications for the idea that Marxism is a form of social criticism. Given that political categories are themselves regarded as mystifying abstractions, it would seem that Marxist social criticism cannot function as a form of transformative redescription within the confines of democratic deliberation, for it must be committed to exposing a politically engaged criticism as misconceived, resting on the abstract idea of persons as *citizens*. By contrast, Marxist social criticism, tied to the idea of human emancipation as the liberation of humanity from such abstractions is committed to the liberation of humanity not only from capitalist relations of production, but also from political institutions *per se*.

This might seem a hopelessly utopian goal for Marxist social criticism, but of itself this is not necessarily a fundamental problem: the idea that the world should be other than it is, is arguably the fundamental premise of any moral project, and Marxism could be regarded simply as having set itself an especially difficult task. If it could be shown, however, that the ethical goal of Marxist social criticism was itself unattractive in some way, or that it was internally incoherent, then it could no longer be defended as merely utopian, but would have to be rejected. The chief reason for doubting the coherence of Marxism as a form of social criticism is provided by the materialist conception of history, and the idea that morality itself may be explained by it as an ideological abstraction, because 'Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines'. Marx goes on to say:

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<sup>18</sup> 'Equality is nothing but a translation of the German *'Ich=Ich'* in to the French, i.e. political form.' Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p.312.

I have dealt at greater length with the 'undiminished proceeds of labour' on the one hand, and with 'equal right' and 'fair distribution', on the other, in order to show what a crime it is to attempt, on the one hand, to force on our Party again, as dogmas, ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish, while again perverting, on the other, the realistic outlook, which it has cost so much effort to instil into the Party but which has now taken root in it by means of ideological, legal and other trash so common among the Democrats and French Socialists.<sup>19</sup>

As Allen Wood has argued, Marx is not a moralist, but is rather a critic of morality, who aims simply to explain it in terms of its function in society, as part of the legal and political superstructure resting upon the real foundation provided by the mode of production.<sup>20</sup> Principles of justice are, seen from the perspective of the materialist conception of history, relative to particular societies, to particular modes of production and explained by them. In this way the 'individualism' of notions like that of human rights is a reflection of the market based economy of bourgeois society.<sup>21</sup> The materialist conception of history constitutes an objective, socio-historical level of description, one which explains morality in historical terms as the product of a particular set of social relations and which has no application outside those relations. In adopting this stance with respect to moral concepts historical materialism adopts an objective interpretation of morality as a product of different cultures akin to that

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<sup>19</sup> Marx, Critique of the Gotha Programme, Collected Works Vol. 24 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p.87.

<sup>20</sup> 'As I read him, Marx is, like Nietzsche, a critic of morality. Like Nietzsche, he seeks to understand the actual function in human life of moral values and standards, and to make an assessment of them on the basis of non-moral goods.' Wood, 'Marx on right and justice: a reply to Husami,' p.125. This reply is to a criticism of Wood's 'The Marxian critique of justice', both pieces being published in Marx, justice, and history, M. Cohen, T. Nagel and T. Scanlon (eds.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp.3-41 and 106-34 respectively.

<sup>21</sup> See C. B. Macpherson's critique of liberalism The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism for an influential statement of this view.

adopted by moral particularists like Rorty and Walzer. While these latter theorists seek to minimise the tension between this objective account of morality and the subjective standpoint of the moral agent, Marx, by contrast, adopts a debunking attitude to morality. The objective account which exposes morality as a product of class society in general, and talk of justice and rights as the ideological abstractions of bourgeois society in particular, is taken to be foundational, while moral concepts are regarded as mere abstractions. This claim, like any claim to absoluteness made on behalf of any range of description must be regarded as incoherent: it is unable to demonstrate its own special relationship to that which it describes without presupposing that which is to be explained, namely that very relationship. In view of this, the 'exposure' of morality on the basis of the sort of objective, socio-historical view produced by the materialist conception of history must be regarded as a failure.

The foundationalist character of historical materialism and the rejection of morality which follows from it, provide us with reasons for thinking that Marxist social criticism is not simply utopian, but rather that it is basically incoherent and necessarily morally inarticulate. In view of this it cannot serve as a useful model of social criticism. This may be a surprising conclusion to many 'Marxists', who, as Cohen observes, regard Marxism as providing a basically moral critique of capitalism.<sup>22</sup> Others, however, have been happy to acknowledge that Marxist ideology critique carries no moral force, taking the view that Marxism's criticism has a strictly 'scientific' character, which is to say that it simply exposes ideology as false and in so doing enables the working class to see where its true interests lie. This view, that of 'vulgar' or 'scientific' Marxism, sees no need for moralising and takes its lead from Marx's frequent attacks on utopian, moralistic, socialism, and his insistence that communism was not an ideal to be established, but was rather the real movement of history toward the abolition of class society, a movement revealed by historical materialism. Another version of

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<sup>22</sup> G. A. Cohen notes that there is, nonetheless, 'a tension between the Marxist commitment to the advance of productive power and the Marxist commitment to those at whose expense that advancement occurs.' Cohen, 'Freedom, Justice, and Capitalism,' New Left Review 126 (1981), pp.3-16. (p.16).



'scientific' Marxism, the orthodox view from Marx's death until the demise of the Second International (1889-1914), typically regarded class struggle as of secondary importance, and accorded primacy to the development of economic forces.<sup>23</sup> On this economic determinist account, Marxism as science grasped the movement of history, but did not itself influence it. Its function was not that of social criticism because it was a mistake to suppose that the course of history could be altered by redescribing the world in order to motivate the working class to engage in revolutionary activity.

It must be recognised that even this scientific critique of ideology is a failure, however, because it assumes the truth of the descriptions and explanations constructed with the aid of the concepts of historical materialism.<sup>24</sup> As Lukács insisted, Marxism cannot consistently exempt itself from the materialist analysis, and this means that it must include itself within the objective description of the world which it offers.<sup>25</sup> To suppose that everything except the truth of historical materialism is to be understood historically would clearly be contradictory. On Lukács' view, the possibility of historical materialism only presents itself as a certain stage in history, and being the product of bourgeois society in crisis, it is not strictly applicable to other eras of history as 'vulgar' Marxism had supposed. While this is a more consistent and a more objective Marxism, in that it includes itself within its own analysis, it does not remove the problem of relativism which simply went unacknowledged by 'scientific' Marxism, for, on Lukács' view, not only the concepts of morality but also those of epistemology are the products of a particular social formation and are only applicable within that

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<sup>23</sup> See Karl Korsch's discussion of Hilferding's 'scientific' Marxism in Marxism and Philosophy, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), pp.60-5. Also, Lucio Colletti, From Rousseau to Lenin, (London: New Left Books, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> This diminishes the significance of the distinction between negative and positive conceptions of ideology in the Marxist tradition, for both are undermined by the relativism required by historical materialism, even if this is not recognised by those who subscribe to the negative view, i.e. the view which regards ideology critique as opposing falsehood. See Jorge Larrain for this distinction: The Concept of Ideology.

<sup>25</sup> Lukács argues that historical materialism must be 'applied to itself' despite the problems of relativism which this poses. Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, p.228.

formation.<sup>26</sup> If we were to adopt this view as reasoning agents, then truth would become 'true for us at this point in history'. This is the same sort of revision of our concepts advocated by Rorty, and it is subject to the same objections: ultimately we have no reason to suppose that the objective view is the correct one to adopt with respect to these concepts. Lukács' Hegelian Marxism is incoherent just like any other form of relativism, in that if it is held to be true then it is false, and for this reason it is false. It is clear then that a historical materialist social criticism is not possible, even if it seeks to retain truth while abandoning morality, for this version too, is still incoherent.

By focusing on the foundationalist claim made for historical materialism as subject to the incoherence attendant on any foundationalist claim, it should be clear that Marxist analysis cannot be saved by rejecting 'economic determinism' and affirming the possibility that elements of the legal and political superstructure are free to effect social change. Certainly, unless one adopts the view that class struggle can bring about social transformation, there is no obvious motivation for engaging in social criticism, but arguing that class struggle is possible is not enough to show that Marxist social criticism is viable. The virtue of a Hegelian Marxism such as Lukács' is taken to be that it treats society as a 'totality' of mutually interdependent elements as opposed to distinguishing between an economic base as an independent causal variable, and an ideological superstructure which is then determined by it.<sup>27</sup> Firstly, however, the move to 'totality' from the base-superstructure model does not seem to prevent most Marxists from believing that the economy remains fundamental in the last instance and if this move were to signify a break with 'economism' it would conflict with Marx's

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<sup>26</sup> 'The substantive truths of historical materialism are of the same type as were the truths of classical economics in Marx's view: they are truths within a particular social order and system of production. As such, but only as such, their claim to validity is absolute. But this does not preclude the emergence of societies in which by virtue of their different social structure other categories and other systems of truth prevail.' Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p.228.

<sup>27</sup> Allen Wood suggests that we must adopt a Hegelian view of the relations between the economic foundation and the legal and political superstructure, i.e. a view which treats these as moments within the development of the social totality, rather than in terms of two variables, one of which is causally determined by the other. Wood, 'The Marxian Critique of Justice,' pp. 9-11.

insistence on the primacy of economic factors in producing social change.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, the precise causal role given to the economy or to the superstructure is strictly beside the point: even if we grant that economic forces have no special weight as motors of social change, the historical materialist outlook is still one which adopts an objective, external view of society and of our moral and epistemological concepts, such that we are dissociated from our standpoint as agents within society when we adopt this outlook. It is the foundational status accorded to this perspective which is the root of the problem with Marxism as a putative form of social criticism, and not 'economic determinism', for the incoherence remains even when determinism is denied.

This dissociation is evident in Lukács' treatment of the class struggle. While he criticises the 'economism' of scientific Marxism for neglecting the role of 'violence' in bringing about historical change, his account of class struggle is curiously disengaged in the sense that he wants to say that it is an activity engaged in by free, intentional agents on one hand, while on the other hand his objective analysis compels him to speak of it as a happening, an event occurring in accordance with the 'profounder historical forces which in reality control events'<sup>29</sup> He says of the consciousness of the proletariat:

...this consciousness is nothing but the expression of historical necessity. The proletariat 'has no ideals to realise'. When its consciousness is put into practice it can only breathe life into the things which the dialectics of history have forced into a crisis; it can never 'in

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<sup>28</sup> Lukács himself says, 'Ideological factors do not really 'mask' economic interests, they are not merely banners and slogans: they are the parts, the components of which the real struggle is made. Of course if historical materialism is to be deployed to discover the *sociological meaning* of these struggles, economic interests will doubtless be revealed as *decisive factors* in any explanation.' Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, p.58.

<sup>29</sup> Lukács, 'The Changing function of historical materialism', History and Class Consciousness, p.224.

practice' ignore the course of history, forcing on it what are no more than its own desires or knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

On one hand, historical materialism, is represented as a 'weapon' in the class struggle, but on the other hand, it stands in the same relation to events that Hegel believed philosophy to stand, which is to say, outside them, comprehending them as they come to pass, like the wisdom of Minerva.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, a number of Marxists have wanted to say that Marxism provides a moral critique of capitalism. The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, for example, while eschewing discussion of morality, is motivated by the sense that capitalism is not only doomed by the 'iron-laws' of history, as it were, but also by the sense that it is ethically unacceptable.<sup>32</sup> There are two chief strands of opinion regarding the place of moral concepts within Marxism: firstly, there is the view that Marxism contains a theory of justice according to which capitalism is an unjust social order; secondly, there is the view that while Marx was a critic of justice and morality in the sense that the latter consists of a body of moral principles, he has an ethic of emancipation centred on the concept of alienation.<sup>33</sup> On this latter view communism will not be a

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<sup>30</sup> Lukács, 'Reification and class consciousness', History and Class Consciousness, p.178.

<sup>31</sup> Lukács argues that the emergence of a self-conscious capitalism is a sign of its imminent dissolution, for only when a form of life has fully developed and is on the verge of being superseded, can it be comprehended. The same must be true too of the consciousness of the proletariat, in which the emergence of historical materialism must be a sign that class society is on the verge of being overcome. In neither case is consciousness accorded a determining role in bringing about the dissolution of social relations, but is rather viewed externally, as a 'symptom' of deeper processes which it can only reflect. Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, pp.58-9.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Herbert Marcuse: 'Concentration camps, mass exterminations, world wars, and atom bombs are no 'relapse into barbarism' but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology and domination. And the most effective subjugation and destruction of man takes place at the height of civilisation, when the material and intellectual attainments of mankind seem to allow the creation of a truly free world.' Marcuse, Eros and Civilisation, (1956) (London: Ark, 1987), p.4.

<sup>33</sup> As suggested above, the 'moral' Marx is something of a latecomer, as Marxist orthodoxy initially accepted that he was a critic of morality. Norman Geras notes that the literature on Marx and justice which he surveyed amounted to 'three dozen items all but one of which have appeared since 1970',

more just social order, but will rather be a society beyond justice, in which people will have been liberated from the various forms of alienation which pertained previously.

Allen Wood, while taking Marx to be a critic of morality *per se*, suggested that consistent with his materialist analysis of concepts like justice he would have judged capitalism 'just' according to the principles of justice proper to capitalist society.<sup>34</sup> Those who argue that Marx condemned capitalism as unjust point, however, to the references to capitalism as 'robbery' and 'embezzlement' with which Marx's writings are peppered, and also to the suggestion that communist society will be organised around a needs based theory of justice, in contrast to the 'contribution principle' which governs capitalism. Husami, for example, argues that because capitalism is a class divided society, it must contain a second, proletarian conception of justice and that consequently Marx need not accept capitalism's view of itself as just: an alternative view is possible, consistent with historical materialism.<sup>35</sup> While Husami criticises Wood for confusing Marx's 'sociology of morals' with his 'Marxian moral theory' his own view of the clash between proletarian and bourgeois justice is itself 'sociological' in the sense that as in Lukács' theory, the superiority of the proletarian conception is not explained in terms of the contents of the theory itself, but rather in terms of its being the theory of the 'rising class' as identified by historical materialism.<sup>36</sup>

The claim that Marx had a developed theory of justice is not textually convincing however: the reference to a principle of needs based distribution itself occurs in the same text in which justice and rights are condemned as 'obsolete verbal

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suggesting that for the most part Marxists have either accepted that Marxism is not an form of ethical social criticism or that they have failed to recognise the tension between the demands of historical materialism and those of morality. Geras, 'The Controversy about Marx and justice,' New Left Review 150 (1985), pp.47-88. (p.48).

<sup>34</sup> 'Whatever else capitalism may be for Marx, it does not seem that it is unjust.' Wood, 'The Marxian critique of justice,' p.3.

<sup>35</sup> Ziyad I. Husami, 'Marx on distributive justice' in Marx, justice, and history, pp.42-79.

<sup>36</sup> 'The rising class as the harbinger of the new society, embodies the future outlook, the outlook that will become dominant. In its struggle with the declining class, it criticises the declining society in terms of the would-be ruling norms. Class conflicts are reflected in conflicts of ideas.' Husami, 'Marx on distributive justice', p.49-50.

rubbish', and it hardly amounts to a developed theory of justice.<sup>37</sup> The fact that Marx's works contain numerous moral condemnations of the injustice of capitalism, but no attempt to elaborate a coherent moral critique of capitalism, indeed, that they contain on the contrary a coherent explanation of the pointlessness of such an attempt, suggests that it is more difficult to avoid morality than critics of morality might suppose.<sup>38</sup>

Others have made an altogether more convincing case for the view that Marx possesses an ethical outlook of an altogether different character, one based on the critique of alienation. This critique rests on a substantive account of human nature and the good life as that of self-realisation, in order to criticise capitalism as dehumanising on account of the way social relations alienate people from their true nature and prevent their self-realisation. History is tending toward the abolition of dehumanising, bourgeois institutions and in their place will be established a technologically developed communist society, characterised by abundance and the absence of social conflict, as private property and classes will have been themselves abolished. As Buchanan argues, this model of an unalienated humanity, no longer in the circumstances of justice, namely, scarcity, will have no need of principles of justice. Furthermore, this goal can motivate an ethical critique of the dehumanising effects of capitalism.<sup>39</sup> The strength of this view is that it is consistent with the critique of morality as an individualising

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<sup>37</sup> Jon Elster observes that Marx's remarks do not amount to a theory but only 'useful first approximations'. Having said that, he takes the view that while Marx may have thought of justice in a non-relativist way himself, communism is conceived rightly or wrongly as a society beyond justice. Elster, An Introduction to Karl Marx, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.92-3.

<sup>38</sup> Geras claims that Marx thought that capitalism was unjust but 'did not think that he thought so'. Marx was no moral philosopher, he notes, and consistently criticised those socialists who attempted to advance a moral critique of capitalism. Nonetheless, he could not avoid letting his own moral disapproval of capitalism show through in his writings from time to time. Geras, apparently deliberately, skirts what is clearly the real issue in this controversy, i.e. whether a normative critique of capitalism is consistent with historical materialism? Geras, 'The Controversy about Marx and justice,' p.72.

<sup>39</sup> Allen Buchanan, Marx and Justice, (London: Methuen, 1982). Also his 'Marx, morality, and history: an assessment of recent analytical work on Marx,' Ethics 98 (1987), pp.104-36.

abstraction, which, contrary to the true nature of humanity, represents human relations in terms of conflict between rights-bearing individuals.

While this view is superior in this respect to the claim that Marx thought capitalism unjust, it is still subject to the criticism that it is itself not consistent with historical materialism. As Lukács' version of Marxism makes abundantly clear, the idea that communism represents emancipation from alienating or reifying bourgeois social relations is not itself sufficient to warrant the view that Marxism is a form of ethical social criticism, for this can form part of an objective interpretation of history as a process in which man is alienated from his true humanity, only to have it restored again at a higher level as history works itself out. It would remain the case then that communism is the 'real movement of history' rather than an ethical ideal to be established. To adopt the critique of alienation as an ethical ideal would still come into conflict with the objective standpoint of historical materialism, in which alienation is a necessary element of the historical process, and not simply an evil to be combated. The differences between the morality of justice and the ethic of freedom pale into insignificance against the basic conflict between the subjective view of the ethical/moral subject and the objective explanation of that view from the standpoint of historical materialism.

Even if it were not the case that 'ethical Marxism' remains unavoidably inconsistent with historical materialism, it is not clear that the critique of alienation is an attractive model of social criticism in itself. This is because it is incapable of recognising the fact of pluralism. One way in which this is reflected is in the fact that the critique of alienation does not in any way counter Marx's consistently dismissive attitude to politics, because politics and the idea that we may relate to one another as citizens, with the particular rights and obligations that this entails, is itself taken to be a mystifying, alienating way of relating to one another. Even if we regard Marxism as a form of social criticism premised on an ethic of emancipation then, it would not alter the orthodox Marxist interpretation of the political sphere as something we must be emancipated *from*, rather than something we must participate *in*. Relatively 'political'

Marxists like Gramsci, who attached considerable weight to political activity and the construction of hegemony, still reflect an attitude to politics which is strictly *strategic*, an attitude in which politics is treated solely in terms of strategies for acquiring power.<sup>40</sup> The only consideration, even on the ethical view, is that of hastening the establishment of communism, and even those who defend the notion that Marxism is a form of ethical criticism admit that it has fostered an overly cynical attitude to political conduct.<sup>41</sup>

This attitude to politics reflects a deeper problem within the ethic of emancipation with respect to pluralism, which is to say, the view that people may legitimately differ on questions of ethics and morality. This is reflected in Marx's attitude to the phenomenon of situation, which as we have seen, is typically brought in to explain the fact of pluralism. Historians of political thought make use of the idea to explain why persons situated in different contexts hold beliefs quite different to those held by contemporary readers; feminist standpoint theorists use the idea to insist on the idea that there exist distinctly gendered ways of thinking about the world; and moral particularists like Rorty and Walzer use the idea to explain the plurality of beliefs located at the level of cultures and societies. While each of these uses of situation differs from the others in some way, namely, in the way that they draw the line between situations, for example, between genders, eras, or cultures, and, while they differ in their understanding of the implications of this for understanding and moral

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<sup>40</sup> See Gramsci's military conception of politics in the Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.) (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), pp.229-41.

<sup>41</sup> Buchanan argues that Marxists have failed to address the problem of revolutionary morality in Marxism and Justice. Geras, for his part, concludes his survey with a remarkable condemnation of Marxist cynicism, saying that, 'there is a real and deep-seated inconsistency on Marx's part, and one with not very happy effects. Some of these may have been innocent enough: the many socialists who have simply followed him in the same obfuscation, confusing both themselves and others, in one breath denying the normative standpoint clear as noonday in what they say in the next. Not so innocent, within the complex of historical causes of the crimes and tragedies which have disgraced socialism, is the moral cynicism that has sometimes dressed itself in the authority of traditional 'anti-ethical' pronouncements. Geras, 'The controversy about Marx and justice,' p.87. Steven Lukes argues that while it is correct to say that Marx adopts an ethic of emancipation rather than a morality of '*Recht*', this ethic is unreasonably dismissive of the idea of human rights, and cannot constitute an adequate ethical outlook. Lukes, Marxism and Morality, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).



judgement, all use it to explain the fact of pluralism, regardless of the level at which this pluralism is thought to be located. The Marxist deployment of the idea that we are situated in different contexts differs from all of these, in that there is thought to be only one significant form of situation, namely, class situation, and this is thought to be basically *transitory*, i.e. capable of being abolished. This is not a contingent feature of Marx's analysis but is rather built into the substantive view of human nature as cooperative and creative on which his perfectionist ethic rests, one which regards the harmony of communist society as a necessary consequence of the elimination of alienation.<sup>42</sup>

This view fails first of all to recognise that there are other, non-class based ways in which we are situated with respect to one another, such as gender and ethnicity - situations which would not be abolished even if we were to abolish class situations. The ethic of emancipation, conceived as emancipation from situation, is necessarily incapable of recognising differences between people and on account of this it is powerless to offer guidance as to how we should respond to these differences. While we are inevitably situated in particular societies, roles, traditions, institutions and identities, this is not to say that one situation is as good as any other: some identities we assume in virtue of our situation may be implicated in dehumanising and oppressive relationships, as class identities clearly are, and as many forms of gender and ethnic identities are. What we require, however, are moral principles to help guide us in our judgements as to what identities and practices, or what aspects of these, are illegitimate and also to help us determine what we may reasonably do about this. The suggestion that we could simply transcend our situatedness altogether, which is Marx's suggestion, seems on one hand to require the impossible of us, while on the other offering little practical guidance as to how we are to make our way in a world characterised by such pluralism. The conclusion we must draw from these considerations is that a viable form of social criticism must be equipped to offer such

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<sup>42</sup> See Marcuse's Eros and Civilisation.

guidance, and that the Marxist ethic of freedom cannot therefore constitute such a form of criticism. Social criticism must proceed by giving people reasons to transform their belief. On account of its relativism with respect to truth and morality, Marxism cannot provide the basis of such criticism.

The strategy of Marxist social criticism, namely, that of exposing power relations at work in diverse, and apparently unrelated, phenomena, by tracing their connections to wider social forces has tremendous redescriptive force. However, the force of this criticism is weakened to the extent that historical materialism is hostile to normative deliberation. To be sure, this is usually overlooked by Marxist social critics, who espouse a broadly egalitarian ethical outlook, but it has traditionally rendered Marxist social criticism unable to engage in detailed normative deliberation of the sort required in the conduct of criticism in a world characterised by ethical conflict. It will be argued in the next section that the successor to ideology-critique, namely, Foucauldian genealogy, is similarly handicapped by an antipathy to normative deliberation. To this extent there is a basic continuity with Marxism which underlies the apparent conflict between these styles of criticism, that between a dialectical philosophy of history and the Nietzsche-inspired insistence on plurality and discontinuity. This is not to say that the relations of Marxism to Foucauldian genealogy are uncontroversial within the left. On the contrary, many are explicitly concerned with the dubious ethical import of Foucauldian critique. As the foregoing will have indicated, however, it is not at all clear that Marxism is any more normatively sound than is its successor.

### *Foucauldian Genealogy as Social Criticism*

Increasingly dissatisfied with the perceived shortcomings of Marxism, radical social critics have come to adopt a basically post-Marxist stance, and the critique of ideological mystifications has been superseded by the analysis of discourse as the chief

form of radical social criticism. Marxism is thought to be too reductionist in the sense that it mistakenly treats class identities and antagonisms as the fundamental explanation for social conflict. This has the consequence that Marxism treats other forms of conflict and alternative identities such as gender and ethnicity as of only secondary importance. If these divisions cannot be explained in terms of class conflict, however, then the Marxist ideal of human emancipation is thrown into question. Post-Marxists like Laclau and Mouffe think that radicals must consequently break with the 'classism' of the Marxist tradition, break, that is, with the 'ontological privilege' accorded to class relations in the Marxist analysis of society and social change.<sup>43</sup> This 'classism', they insist, is at work even in the work of popular Western Marxists like Gramsci, who is widely thought of as offering an alternative, less reductionist analysis of politics and culture than that provided by Marxist orthodoxy. The rejection of 'classism', they argue, also entails the rejection of the model of revolutionary action as the means by which social antagonisms will be abolished once and for all. This 'Jacobin imaginary' must give way to a model of society and politics in which plurality and antagonism are seen to be permanent features of the social world.

Because there is no privileged fissure in society which will abolish all antagonisms when it is overcome, we should no longer think of politics in terms of the model of one great revolutionary cataclysm, after which all antagonisms will have been abolished. The construction of hegemony is no longer to be thought of as a precondition for this revolutionary outbreak because any hegemony is necessarily fragile on account of the plurality of 'subject positions' which persons may occupy. Herbert Marcuse, by contrast, had turned to students as a potential agent of revolutionary change when it became apparent that the post-war proletariat could not be counted on to perform this role, but while breaking with orthodoxy on this point, he remained in the grip of the revolutionary imaginary, hoping for a 'Great Refusal' which

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<sup>43</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, (London: Verso, 1985).

would then be followed by total human emancipation.<sup>44</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, however, recognise that because it is possible to find oneself aligned in different ways depending upon the issue at hand. One could be both worker and patriarch, feminist and racist; antagonisms cannot be abolished once and for all, nor can any be singled out as fundamental in the way that Marxism had singled out class antagonism.<sup>45</sup> This break with revolutionary politics and the sociology of identifying potential revolutionary subjects leads them to a rediscovery of politics and the espousal of a commitment to radical democracy.

This analysis has the idea of plurality at its centre: a plurality of identities and possible conflicts attendant upon these. This new analysis requires in turn a new form of social criticism, not one which regards plurality as a form of alienation from our essential humanity, but one which will undermine hegemonic constructions of identity, a social criticism conceived as the critique of identity. In order to elaborate a model of anti-essentialist social criticism, post-Marxists have turned to the work of Michel Foucault and his conception of discourse and the archaeology, or genealogy, thereof has increasingly replaced ideology critique as the leading form of radical social criticism.<sup>46</sup> While Foucauldian social criticism is not subject to the charge that it neglects plurality, it remains open to the charge that it unnecessarily excludes moral considerations from the conduct of social criticism, and in this respect it is ultimately as self-defeating as ideology critique.

In Chapter One we saw that Foucault's notion of a discursive formation, or practice, is thought of as constituting a certain level of description, permitting one to systematically relate a variety of objects, speakers, strategies and rules. This idea, that

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<sup>44</sup> See Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

<sup>45</sup> They claim that 'unfixity' is the condition of all social identities. Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.85.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Jana Sawicki's use of Foucauldian ideas to criticise the essentialism of 'maternalist' treatments of women's identities, 'Foucault, feminism and questions of identity,' in The Cambridge Companion to Foucault, Gary Gutting (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.286-313.

systematic relations pertain which stretch across traditional boundaries like the *oeuvre* or discipline, is something the notion of discourse has in common with that of ideology, namely, the idea that a book, statement, film, a picture or a piece of music might all be related to one another as instances of a larger whole, an ideology. There are a number of important differences however. Foucault insists that the analysis of discourse is not to be thought of as 'interpretation', by which he means that one traces the systematic relations between elements of a discourse not in order to find a hidden, essential truth lying behind the appearances.<sup>47</sup> By contrast ideology critique proceeds by uncovering the secret truth behind the mystifying appearance of ideology.<sup>48</sup> The analyst of discourse however, should, Foucault says, avoid treating discourse as 'allegorical', which is to say, as a version of some deeper truth. The analyst should rather seek to remain focused on its 'positivity'.<sup>49</sup>

One feature of this notion of the positivity of discourse is that discourse is not thought of, as ideology was, in terms of a strict division pertaining between ideas and reality, in which the former were treated as mere reflections of reality. While Marxism frequently insists that ideas are to be studied in terms of their effects and that ideology is something 'real', it nonetheless struggled with the tension between these claims and the materialist premise from which Marxism proceeds.<sup>50</sup> Instead of trying to balance the competing views that ideas simply reflect reality on one hand, but that they are part of it, and have effects within it, on the other, discourse, in common with the treatment of language found in the work of Austin and Wittgenstein, is regarded as a *practice*, a

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<sup>47</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow argue that in this respect, Foucault's method constitutes a clear break with both structural analysis and hermeneutics in Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>48</sup> Lukács, for example, while he holds a 'positive' theory of ideology, nonetheless believes that there is such a thing as 'false consciousness' and that Marxism dispels it by penetrating 'beneath the surface' of appearances. Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, p.224. It should be noted, however, that there is a passage in The Archaeology of Knowledge in which Foucault speaks as if discourse and ideology may exist alongside one another, rather than that the one replaces the other. This underlines the way in which Foucault is less concerned with Marxism than with Phenomenology.

<sup>49</sup> Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.125.

<sup>50</sup> See Korsch's argument to the effect that Marxism must see ideology as something 'real'.

way of acting in the world, and not as a *reflection* of that world.<sup>51</sup> Discourse is analysed in terms of its function and effects and not in terms of the adequacy of its representations. In this way it avoids the limitations of the representationalist treatment of ideas which Marxism cannot quite free itself from, and the implied reductionism of the contrast between ideas and reality. Some have argued that this entails a form of idealism, but this is mistaken, for by treating language as action, and discourse as a social institution, rather than as a reflection of social reality, we do not deny the existence of an independent world, although the foundationalist idea that we could compare the world as it is with the world as it is discursively constructed, is obviously rejected.<sup>52</sup> Foucault's interest in the discursive construction of objects, like sexuality, is consistent with the conceptual pluralism set out in Chapter Two and simply challenges the claim that there are ways of conceiving the world which are not themselves already interpretations of it. This is the significance of the rejection of 'interpretation', and it should be clear that it does not in fact conflict with the pluralist understanding of interpretation set out in earlier chapters.

Finally, the refusal to treat discourse in terms of allegory means that while objects, strategies etc., are systematically related in such a way as to form distinct discursive formations, the relationship between discourses is not itself systematic in the way that all the different legal, political, and religious elements of the ideological superstructure were thought to be tied together in virtue of their relation to the mode of production of a given society. Foucault, by contrast, insists upon the *specificity* of discourse and, while it is by no means illegitimate to compare different discourses and look for identities and differences, we should take care, he thinks, to remember that such comparisons are 'always limited and regional'.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe 'Post-Marxism without apologies' in Laclau, New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, (London: Verso, 1990). Also Michèle Barret, The Politics of Truth, (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

<sup>52</sup> See for example Terry Eagleton's fear that 'discourse' abandons the idea of a language independent world altogether Ideology, (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.159.

Where Marxist ideology critique is guided by the desire to discover a hidden identity, Foucault's archaeology or genealogy of discourse places its emphasis rather upon the local and the specific. The resistance to ideas of identity, essence and origin is the guiding thread connecting Foucault's studies. While his work has been taken up as a response to the perceived deficiencies of Marxism, he himself has drawn attention to the influence of Nietzsche upon his thought and the fact that his initial intellectual motivation was to find an alternative to phenomenological ideas about the centrality of the subject to understanding the world in virtue of its supposedly meaning-constitutive role.<sup>54</sup> To adopt this phenomenological outlook would be to regard discourse as unified and in principle traceable to a single point of origin, an origin provided by the speaking subject.<sup>55</sup> Foucault's idea of archaeology is rather conceived as a way of studying ideas which would resist the tendency to discover unity, or continuities provided by such origins.<sup>56</sup>

The idea of an archaeology of discourse is usually contrasted with Foucault's later notion of a 'genealogy' of discourse, insofar as the latter is taken to be concerned with power, while this is absent from his conception of archaeology. In fact, the 'switch' from archaeology to genealogy signifies less a change of approach or method as much as a shift of focus, or theme on Foucault's part, from a concern with the history of the sciences to an interest in disciplinary techniques. The idea of an analysis which is a critique of identity remains constant.<sup>57</sup> The idea of genealogy, he says,

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<sup>54</sup> Foucault remarks of his intellectual development that 'the first people who had recourse to Nietzsche were not looking for a way out of Marxism. They wanted a way out of phenomenology.' Foucault, 'Critical theory/Intellectual history' in Foucault: politics, philosophy, culture, L. O. Kritzman (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1988), p.24. In another interview he remarks, 'Nietzsche was a revelation to me. I felt that there was someone quite different from what I had been taught. I read him with great passion and broke with my life, left my job in the asylum, left France: I had the feeling I had been trapped. Through Nietzsche I had become a stranger to all that.' Foucault, 'Truth, Power, Self: an interview' in Technologies of the Self, L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (eds.) (London: Tavistock, 1988), p.13.

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, 'What is an author?' Language, Counter-Memory, Practice.

<sup>56</sup> Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.203.

<sup>57</sup> This is obvious from his remarks at the end of the Archaeology in which he maps out his subsequent interests, as possible spheres in which the idea of archaeology might be applied.

indicates a way of tracing the descent of ideas which is non-teleological, it is 'not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.'<sup>58</sup> From the point of view of the genealogist, while it is the case that the present has come to be the way it is on account of the past, it could have been otherwise and the aim of genealogy is to expose the identities, unities and essences of the teleological reading of history as contingencies and in so doing reveal a plurality of possible alternatives: 'the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation.'<sup>59</sup>

Foucauldian social criticism, as an archaeology, or genealogy, of discourse, is basically a critique of identity, of essentialism, aimed at the liberation of alternatives. Given this determination not to treat discourse as a mask for some more basic description, or analysis of the world, for example, one which reveals class at work behind every appearance, the products of this criticism appear rather disparate: there are books on the history of medicine and the sciences, on prisons and on sexuality. However, while he has frequently insisted that each work be read in isolation from the others: readers should avoid organising them into a unity centred on the concepts of the author or the *oeuvre*, Foucault has equally offered a variety of interpretations of the unity of his work: for example, that he has been concerned with 'the different modes by which in our culture human beings are made subject.'<sup>60</sup> In a late interview he says:

I tried to locate three major types of problems: the problem of truth, the problem of power, and the problem of individual conduct. These

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<sup>58</sup> Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, p.147.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', p. 162.

<sup>60</sup> 'I should like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. It has not been to analyse the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis.' Foucault, 'The Subject and Power' an Afterword to Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics, H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, p.208.



three domains of experience can only be understood in relation to each other, not independently. What bothered me about the previous books is that I considered the first two experiences without taking the third into account.<sup>61</sup>

The guiding idea throughout is the critique of identity: the concern with truth, power, and individual conduct, or subjectivity, forms the basis of what he has called his 'critical ontology of the present', a historical enterprise which will show the contingencies at work in the ways our identities have been constituted.<sup>62</sup> I want to start by examining the connections made between power and truth first of all, before discussing the connection between power, subjectivity, and morality. I will argue that while a case may be made for denying that Foucault adopts a reductive attitude to truth, the same cannot be said of his treatment of morality.

Foucault makes three central points about power. Firstly, he contrasts the traditional conception of power in terms of sovereignty, that is, power as centralised, with the idea of power as a network. By this he means that power is dispersed throughout the social body. Secondly, where power is customarily thought of in negative terms, as prohibition or repression, Foucault would rather have us see it as productive. Thirdly, where power has been contrasted with truth, as it is in the Marxist idea of ideology, in which possession of the truth is thought to be

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<sup>61</sup> Foucault, 'Return of Morality' in Foucault: politics, philosophy, culture, p.243.

<sup>62</sup> Foucault suggests that there is a choice to be made between 'a critical philosophy that will present itself as an analytic philosophy of truth in general, or ... a critical thought that will take the form of, 'an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present; it is this form of philosophy that, from Hegel, through Nietzsche and Max Weber to the Frankfurt School, has founded a form of reflection in which I have tried to work.' Foucault, 'The Art of Telling the Truth' in Foucault: politics, philosophy, culture, p.95. Elsewhere Foucault argues that there is a connection between his own enterprise of 'a critical ontology of ourselves' and Kant's, in 'What is Enlightenment?', in that both are engaged on critical reflection upon the role of their philosophical work in the context of their times. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in The Foucault Reader, Paul Rabinow (ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

emancipatory, Foucault insists that the two are intimately related. Indeed, power produces bodies of knowledge and truth: it is creative, not repressive.<sup>63</sup>

The idea that knowledge and power are linked is not itself especially original. Their connection is discussed, for example, in Francis Bacon's project for an inductive science.<sup>64</sup> Foucault however reverses this relationship. Marxism presupposed a clear distinction between ideology and science, with science serving to demystify capitalist social relations. On this model, power would seem to reside with the bourgeoisie, while truth lies on the other side, with the proletariat. Foucauldian criticism cannot rest on such an assumption however, because, on Foucault's account, knowledge cannot be thought of as essentially opposed to power because 'truth is already power.'<sup>65</sup> It would appear then that Foucauldian criticism is not epistemological in the way that scientific Marxist ideology critique was. Even studying the relationship between power and truth may not be innocent, because there is no sense in which we are ever outside power relations: 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.'<sup>66</sup> Discovering the truth about our situation will not necessarily set us free.

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<sup>63</sup> See Foucault, The History of Sexuality Vol. 1, (1976) R. Hurley (trans.), (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978), pp.82-97. Also Foucault, 'Two Lectures' and 'Truth and Power' in Power/Knowledge, C. Gordon (ed.) (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

<sup>64</sup> 'For there is no power on earth which setteth up a throne or chair of state in the spirits and souls of men, and in their cogitations, imaginations, opinions, and beliefs, but knowledge and learning.' Bacon, The Advancement of Learning, (1605) (London: Dent, 1915), p.65. Note the discussion of Bacon in relation to the development of the Enlightenment in Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment, (1944) John Cumming (trans.) (London: Verso, 1979).

<sup>65</sup> 'It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera; for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the system of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.' One might argue that the 'traditional' model of the relations between power and truth does not simply oppose them as Foucault suggests: knowledge is commonly said to be power after all. It may be the case that what Foucault has in mind is that unjust exercises of power may not be opposed by an appeal to truth, while the conventional assumption is that truth and justice will not come into conflict. Foucault is at pains not to include the category of justice within his account of power, however, save in the sense that it belongs to an outmoded conception of power. Foucault, 'Truth and Power', p.133.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, History of Sexuality Vol. 1, p.93.

This apparent identification of knowledge and power seems to open up the prospect of a different sort of reduction: one which sees power, newly liberated from the interpretive framework of the class struggle, everywhere, behind, or perhaps flowing through all areas of social life including the activities of social criticism itself. Detaching power from the class struggle has the effect of alerting us to hitherto unnoticed exercises of power but it appears to involve little more than a slightly more sophisticated version of the sort of objective socio-historical standpoint adopted by historical materialists, one which explains 'truth' as the effect of power. If this were so, then Foucault would be open to the same anti-foundationalist criticism to which Marx was subject.

However, there are some indications that an alternative reading is possible. Firstly, he has insisted that despite his loose remarks about truth being 'already power', his interest, all along, has been in the relations between truth and power: 'The very fact that I pose the question of their relation,' he says, 'proves clearly that I do not identify them.'<sup>67</sup> He insists, for example, that in showing that truth is connected to power relations, this does not in any way suggest that it ceases to be truth and, while 'truth' is inevitably connected to power, it does make sense, he argues, to suppose that knowledge can nonetheless 'separate itself from the practices in which it was formed'.<sup>68</sup> This seems to suggest that power does not make ideas true or false, despite the connection of what Foucault might call 'games of truth' with power relations. Indeed, Foucault suggests that his analysis of knowledge actually brackets the idea of truth in order to see how it functions in society. In this way he can study different conceptions, different uses, of 'truth' without offering a judgement as to the ultimate truth of any

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<sup>67</sup> When I read, and I know it has been attributed to me - the thesis that 'Knowledge is power' or 'Power is knowledge', I begin to laugh, since studying their relation is precisely my problem. If they were identical I would not have to study them and I would be spared a lot of fatigue as a result. The very fact that I pose the question of their relation proves clearly that I do not *identify* them.' Foucault, *Critical Theory/Intellectual History*, "Foucault: philosophy, politics, culture", p.43.

<sup>68</sup> Afterword to *Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*, p.194.

one of these.<sup>69</sup> This interpretation of Foucault's views on truth and power does not entail the relativism with which he is often charged.<sup>70</sup> Like J. L. Austin he is simply approaching knowledge at a certain level of description, taking sentences as acts, while not denying that they can also be taken as propositions which are true or false.<sup>71</sup> This is not only a more plausible view than the view that power is truth or that it creates truth, but it is also consistent with the view that Foucault is a pluralist with respect to interpretation and with his resistance to 'allegorical' interpretations of discourse, in which power, for example, would turn out to be the hidden meaning of discourse, right across the board.<sup>72</sup>

When we turn to what Foucault has to say about morality, however, the situation is more complex, for while conceptual pluralism could render a moral outlook compatible with his analysis of the relations between power and subjectivity, Foucault's stated view of morality is actively hostile to it and does not invite such a reading. When Foucault rejects the ideas of power as 'sovereign' and of power as prohibition he is not only making a point at the level of socio-historical analysis: that we should cease to analyse power as centralised, possessed ultimately by a ruling class, or vested in the State, he also means to exclude a range of questions about power associated with this 'juridical' conception, namely, about 'right and violence, law and illegality; freedom and

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<sup>69</sup> 'They don't have the same regime of truth as ours. which, it has to be said, is very special, even if it has become almost universal. The Greeks had their own. The Arabs of the Maghreb have another. And in Iran it is largely modelled on a religion that has an exoteric form and an esoteric content.' 'Iran, the spirit of a world without spirit,' in Foucault: philosophy, politics, culture, p.223.

<sup>70</sup> 'All those who say, that, for me, truth doesn't exist are being simplistic.' 'The concern for truth,' Foucault: philosophy, politics, culture p.257. Foucault adopts the same attitude to 'reason', observing that, 'For me no given form of rationality is actually reason,' 'Critical Theory/Intellectual History' Foucault: philosophy, politics, culture p.35.

<sup>71</sup> Hoy observes, '...Foucault does not deny truth, but, on the contrary, is interested in uncovering the historical conditions that make it seem worthwhile to gather and formulate certain kinds of truth...' Hoy, 'A history of consciousness: from Kant and Hegel to Derrida and Foucault,' in History of the Human Sciences 4 (1991), pp.261-81.

<sup>72</sup> Foucault actually describes himself as a 'pluralist' with respect to his anti-reductionist analysis of discourse in Foucault, 'Politics and the Study of Discourse' in The Foucault Effect, G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (eds.) (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.55.

the will, and especially the state and sovereignty.<sup>73</sup> This conception of power, Foucault claims, is essentially a product of monarchy, however, by means of the idea of popular sovereignty this anachronism continues to exercise a hold on our imaginations: 'we still have not cut off the head of the king.'<sup>74</sup> In place of a concern with legality and legitimacy we should 'substitute' a focus on the methods by which power is applied, and in particular we should focus our attention upon 'the extreme points of its application' and at 'the techniques and tactics of domination.'<sup>75</sup>

The chief reason for this appears to be because these questions belong to the idea of power as sovereignty and that this era has passed or is passing as new forms of power, which operate in very different ways, have developed. Foucault calls this 'bio-power' or 'pastoral power' and what he has in mind are the disciplines and knowledges associated with the welfare state.<sup>76</sup> Bio power, with its statistical techniques and 'normalising' effects, requires a new set of analytical techniques and, perhaps, a new sort of politics in which localised, tactical, resistance replaces the old idea of emancipation through a single revolutionary outbreak. Even if this were true, as a matter of the sociology of power, it is not clear why we cannot continue to pose normative questions about the proper exercise of bio-power.

The answer lies with the Nietzschean basis of Foucault's outlook. One way in which this is reflected is in his claim that morality is 'over', that morality is no longer possible for the present age:

Modern thought has never, in fact, been able to propose a morality. But the reason for this is not because it is pure speculation; on the contrary, modern thought, from its inceptions and in its very density, is a certain

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<sup>73</sup> Foucault, History of Sexuality Vol. 1. p. 89.

<sup>74</sup> Foucault, History of Sexuality Vol. 1. p.89.

<sup>75</sup> Foucault, 'Two lectures,' p.102.

<sup>76</sup> Foucault, History of Sexuality Vol.1, p. 140. Afterword to Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics.

mode of action. Let those who urge thought to leave its retreat and to formulate its choices talk on and let those who seek, without any pledge and in the absence of virtue, to establish a morality do as they wish. For modern thought no morality is possible. Thought had already 'left' itself in its own being as early as the nineteenth century; it is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot help but liberate or enslave.<sup>77</sup>

It is not simply that the exercise of power has altered, by dispersing itself throughout society, but also that the 'secret' of morality is now out, as it were, namely that it is a form of action and as such it must be regarded as itself an exercise of power.<sup>78</sup> However, a debunking move of this sort leaves itself open to the charge that it simply assumes the foundational character of a certain description of morality as *action* and hence as an expression of power. Foucault's resistance to morality must have deeper roots than this for his own avowed pluralism is not consistent with this treatment of morality.

His hostility to morality actually relies closely on Nietzsche's claim about the connections between punishment and identity. Nietzsche argued that morality was itself a product of resentment and the desire of the weak to revenge themselves upon the strong. This is not picked up by Foucault, but what does inform his views is the idea that there is a connection between punishment and the constitution of identity, namely, that morality creates identities in order to apportion responsibility and apply

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<sup>77</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (1966) (London: Tavistock, 1970), p.328. Years later Foucault reiterated this view in an interview saying that morality was 'now disappearing, has already disappeared.' Foucault, 'The Aesthetics of Existence' in *Foucault: philosophy, politics, culture*, p.49.

<sup>78</sup> Foucauldians like Francois Ewald simply endorse this analysis. 'Foucault and the contemporary scene,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25 (1999), pp.81-92.

punishment.<sup>79</sup> While we may have reservations about the claim that morality is an expression of resentment, it is clear enough that identity plays a fundamental role in concepts like freedom and responsibility, and therefore, in morality. The concept of freedom relies on the idea that our actions spring from an identical point of origin, a point within ourselves, and even from the same place within ourselves: the conscience, reason, or ego. To be driven from without, or by competing impulses from within, would mean that we were not free to direct ourselves, but rather that we were, in Kant's terminology, 'heteronomous'. Equally, responsibility requires that the moral agent must be identical, in some sense, over time in order that he or she may be held responsible for past misdeeds, for example. Given the necessary link between morality and identity, it becomes apparent that morality as an institution runs directly counter to Foucault's genealogical task of dissipating identities.

This Nietzschean understanding of morality is clearly at work in Foucault's study of prisons which is, he says, 'intended as a correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge; a genealogy of the present scientifico-legal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases.'<sup>80</sup> The emergence of the modern prison, he argues, is connected to a host of other developments: techniques for disciplining the body, for examining and surveying individuals, present in barracks, schools, hospitals and prisons. These techniques should not be thought of as basically repressive, he argues, but rather as creative, in the sense that they have created the modern individual, which is to say, they have created a conception of humanity as the object of concern for an array of experts and administrators.<sup>81</sup> The concept of the

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<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche poses the question of how it was that responsible individuals, creatures with consciences, and the 'right to make promises' were created, in the second essay of On the Genealogy of Morals. See also William Connolly on the connection between morality and identity. Connolly, Identity/Difference, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>80</sup> Foucault, Discipline and Punish. (1975) A. Sheridan (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>81</sup> The holding of examinations 'is at the centre of the procedures that constitute the individual as effect and object of power, as effect and object of knowledge' (p.192). 'We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and

normal healthy individual is a product of the scientific concern with the abnormal, delinquent individual, the criminal.<sup>82</sup>

Morality must be avoided by the genealogist because it is inevitably caught up in the production of prescriptive, essentialist identities. A Marxist-style criticism of morality as a form of alienation gets things the wrong way around on this view: it is not that morality represses or alienates us from our 'humanity' but rather that it produces it in a particular, contestable, way. Such ideas must be subjected to genealogical analysis if we are to liberate ourselves from the particular identities and 'models of freedom' attached to them. For this reason Foucault is resolute in avoiding moral prescription, preferring to use his genealogy as a tool for creating spaces for freedom by criticising established notions of normality and freedom.

This Nietzschean antipathy to the institution of morality must be borne in mind when considering the scope of Foucault's late 'ethical' turn. This centres on the idea of freedom, and is presented in terms of an aesthetic project of self-creation. Whereas his earlier work seemed to present subjectivity as the product of 'carceral society' and argued that, in consequence, 'freedom' was illusory, the later works examine the way in which subjects can discipline *themselves* and in so doing refashion themselves.<sup>83</sup> This is

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rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained from him belong to this production.' Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p.194.

<sup>82</sup> The 'man of modern humanism' is a product of disciplinary techniques. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p.141. Foucault connects 'humanism' to the idea of normalization, arguing that psychological, medical, penitential and educational techniques have created a 'normative' and supposedly 'universal' way of being human. This 'humanism' 'presents a certain form of our ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom.' Foucault, 'Truth, power and the self,' p.15.

<sup>83</sup> Lois McNay seems to read too much into the return of the subject in Foucault's later work, seeing in it the elaboration of an ethics rather than of the possibility of an ethics. She mistakenly attributes a utopian view of the aesthetic to him, which is more properly located in the work of the Frankfurt School. Foucault, far from opposing the aesthetics and the instrumental as they did, makes the instrumental an essential element of the aesthetic. Lois McNay, Foucault: a critical introduction, (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), p.134. Marli Huijer claims that there is an '...ethical commandment to problematise the relationship with 'oneself' to work on it and to follow the precept of transforming 'oneself' into a work of art.' Huijer, 'The aesthetics of existence in the work of Michel Foucault,' Philosophy and Social Criticism 25 (1999), pp.61-85, (p.81). The source of this 'ethical commandment' is, however, not discussed by Huijer.



not so much a departure from the earlier work as a shift of standpoint, from one which viewed subjectivity from afar, emphasising the way in which it is produced behind our backs by social institutions, to an internal standpoint, concerned with the problem of how subjects may exert power over themselves in order to make new selves for themselves. It does not cease to be the case that subjectivity is constituted by social processes behind the back of individuals, or that we are situated in such networks of power and knowledge, but neither is it the case that we are wholly at their mercy. Instead, Foucault emphasises the ever-present possibility of tactical resistance to such 'domination', arguing that this concept is necessarily tied to that of resistance.<sup>84</sup> This notion of resistance is altogether more localised and 'tactical' than the Marxist notion of a one-off revolutionary act of emancipation. Nor does it entail a particular view of the good life, namely, the idea that we are to realise our essential nature and in so doing organise ourselves around a set of pre-established, 'truly human' goods and virtues. Foucault's ethic of the 'care of the self' is a version of the Nietzschean aesthetic ideal which Rorty's ironist embodies: it involves the creation of oneself, and not the discovery of a true self. As Foucault puts it, 'the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.'<sup>85</sup>

This is an ethical view of sorts, but it is one which is extremely limited, and deliberately so because, even here, Foucault wishes to avoid prescription, saying of this work that:

People have to build their own ethics, taking as a point of departure the historical analysis, sociological analysis and so on, one can provide for them. I didn't think that people who try to decipher the truth should

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<sup>84</sup> Which is not to say that a logical connection such as this means that resistance is always feasible or that it is likely to be successful. It does suggest, however, that resistance to power is itself an exercise of power and may be implicated in a series of new resistances when it is enacted. There is in this sense, no escape from power but only the possibility of reversing the direction in which it flows, and of establishing new networks of power relations.

<sup>85</sup> Foucault, 'Truth, power and the self,' in Technologies of the Self, p.9.

have to provide ethical principles or practical advice at the same moment, in the same book and the same analysis. All this prescriptive framework has to be elaborated and transformed by people themselves.<sup>86</sup>

His concern is not to offer an ethic as such, but rather to outline a possibility for a sort of relationship to oneself that subordinates the search for the truth about oneself to an ethical/aesthetic relationship to oneself, a model of which he claims to have found in Classical antiquity. It is no part of his project to discuss what sort of identities one should try to construct, projects to pursue, or virtues to cultivate.<sup>87</sup> Freedom can only be exercised as part of an aesthetic commitment to the continual refashioning of the self. The purpose of this is not to cultivate virtue, but takes the refashioning, or, destruction, of identities, as itself the end.

Foucault's genealogical social criticism runs contrary to Marx's critique of alienation. Marx's critique was designed to bring about a world in which conflict would be abolished as antagonistic class situations were themselves abolished. Foucault, by contrast, envisages a world characterised by endless conflict, a never-ending cycle of dispersed, local, tactical resistances to the network of power relations in which we are situated. Foucault wants to exclude the possibility of moral deliberation because it contradicts the genealogical project of the dissipation of identities. If this is supposed to be the dissipation of all identities whatsoever, without regard to moral or ethical judgements as to the goodness or legitimacy of these

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<sup>86</sup> Foucault says here of the *History of Sexuality* that 'If you mean by ethics a code that would tell us how to act then of course the *History of Sexuality* is not an ethics. But if you mean by ethics the relationship you have to yourself when you act, then I would say the it intends to be an ethics, or at least show what could be an ethics of sexual behaviour.' Foucault, 'The Minimalist Self' in Foucault: philosophy, politics, culture, pp.14-16.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Dews sees Foucault's return to the subject as belated recognition that earlier presentations of the subject as no more than an effect of power left no place for freedom in Foucault's scheme. He notes, however, Foucault's continued unwillingness to offer ethical/normative indications as to how this freedom might be directed, preferring instead the 'advocacy of an arbitrary stylisation of life.' Dews, 'The return of the subject in the late Foucault,' Radical Philosophy 51 1988, pp.37-41.

identities, for example, whether they involve those bearing them in sexist or racist social relations, then the critique of identity seems wholly arbitrary. The aim of the critique of identities remains unexplained: what is wrong with identity *per se* that it must be dissipated? If there is no moral basis for criticising identity, is it condemned on conceptual grounds? Are those categories which we use to identify less 'true' than those which we use to distinguish? Ultimately, Foucault not only contradicts his 'pluralism' but falls into the same trap into which Marxism falls: the claim to offer an absolute, objective, understanding of morality, involves genealogy in a claim to absoluteness which cannot be made good. Nonetheless, many Foucauldians have taken this route, ignoring the problems which attend this claim, and have gone on to elaborate a non-moral conception of politics under the banner of 'agonism'. This has two elements: firstly, politics is characterised by ineliminable conflict; and secondly, that everything is political in the sense that it is 'contestable'. To these two, we might add a third: that politics is *about* conflict: that conflict is the end, not the means to some other 'non-political' goal.

### *Agonistic Politics*

An agonistic conception of politics is expounded by post-Marxists like Laclau and Mouffe.<sup>88</sup> This is a conception of politics which centres on the idea of conflict and competition. Against the background of Marxism's basically anti-political stance this, it is claimed, constitutes a 'return of the political'. What this means is that a radical political outlook is no longer premised on the idea that a revolutionary outbreak will bring about a society 'beyond justice', but that the sources of political conflict are multiple and that conflict is ineliminable. While Marxism is reproved for its ambivalence towards democratic institutions, radicals will now be radical democrats,

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<sup>88</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

committed not to the abolition of politics, but rather to the dismantling of hegemonies by means of a critique of the identities they construct and by which they are sustained. This entails the creation of new 'subject positions' by working out equivalences between groups who might otherwise be thought unrelated or even antagonistic to one another. In so doing, the possibility for concerted action on some particular front will be realised. This is not to say, however, that the new hegemonies which this may give rise to will be permanent or unchallengeable. On the contrary, all such constructions and the identities they establish must be regarded as temporary and contestable. Politics is 'agonistic' in the sense that it represents an ongoing series of struggles or 'agons' over the construction and destruction of identities and hegemonies.

Certainly, this is a view espoused by Foucault, who rejected the idea of universal human emancipation in favour of the idea of localised, tactical struggles against particular organisations of identity constituting power and knowledge relations.<sup>89</sup> As resistance is not resistance to power *per se* according to Foucault, but is itself an exercise of power, such tactical opposition, when successful, establishes a realignment of forces, which may itself be overthrown in due course. However, this renewed sense of the significance of the political does not bring with it a sense that political conflicts ought to be considered from a moral point of view. As we saw above, the moral point of view is inevitably wedded to the construction of identity in Foucault's eyes, and for this reason, his 'ethics' offers no normative guidance in political matters. Instead it relies upon genealogy to detect possibilities for freedom, opportunities to resist existing power relations, without indicating what aspects of these are problematic, or what sort of realignment one ought to establish. The agonistic politics which this gives rise to is a basically non-moral conception of politics which treats everything in terms of tactics and power, and which does not distinguish identities which might be worthy of preserving, or which must be respected, from those which are illegitimate and oppressive.

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<sup>89</sup> See Mark Neocleous, 'Perpetual war, or 'war and war again': Schmitt, Foucault, fascism,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 22 (1996), pp.47-66.

Mouffe, for example, criticises Rawls for conceiving of political theory as a branch of moral philosophy, and argues that 'To think the political in terms of moral language as Rawls does, necessarily leads to a neglect of the role played by conflict, power and interest.'<sup>90</sup> It might be argued, of course, that to think about politics and society from a moral point of view does not entail neglecting these phenomena at all, but rather that it entails thinking about them in a particular way, posing questions about the proper limits of conflict, and the legitimate exercise of power. While this differs from a sociological treatment of power, one which details how power is exercised in particular contexts, it is not a standpoint which is indifferent to the operation of power, as Mouffe suggests. It may lack the empirical richness of the socio-historical account, but it makes up for this by offering normative guidance as to how to respond to the exercise of power as we find it. Furthermore, distinguishing between sociological and normative questions enables us to see the limitations of each so that we can better gauge how each sort of question may be related to the other. Mouffe, however, is not interested in combining these perspectives on power, but rather wants to replace the normative point of view with a purely tactical one: 'Political discourse attempts to create specific forms of unity among different interests by relating them to a common project and by establishing a frontier to define the force to be opposed, the 'enemy'.<sup>91</sup> What matters, from this point of view, is not the 'rightness' of a theory, but rather whether it is likely to 'capture the imagination of the new social movements', and she argues that judged in these terms, Rawls' liberalism is a failure. Marxists like Lukács regarded theories like historical materialism as 'weapons' in the class struggle but the new 'agonism' not only judges theory in terms of its effect, but sees the political struggle *itself* as its own end: 'A project of radical and plural democracy...requires the existence of multiplicity, of plurality and of conflict, and sees

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<sup>90</sup> Mouffe, The Return of the Political, (London, Verso, 1993), p.49.

<sup>91</sup> Mouffe adopts Carl Schmitt's view that the friend/enemy relation is the fundamental political relationship. Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.50.

in them the *raison-d'être* of politics.<sup>92</sup> If this is the *raison-d'être* of politics, what is the status of democracy in this scheme? It no longer appears to be regarded as an ethically desirable end to be secured by political struggle, as struggle has become the end.

The extension of the idea of struggle and conflict to the evaluation of moral and political arguments indicates the basic incoherence of this model of politics and the model of social criticism that attends it. For it implies a radical dissociation from our own values and projects, in the sense that we no longer to see them as giving us reasons to engage in politics, but are rather to see them as means to the end of engaging in politics. These values must motivate our engagement, on one hand, but we must be ready to abandon them should they appear to be unpopular. This cannot even be explained in terms of the cynical pursuit of power, however, because this is a conception of politics without any purpose other than to engage in politics. This impossible view is one produced by an objective description of politics which regards it as essentially *about* conflict, because, having debunked morality, it includes within this description an understanding of the reasons why persons might come into conflict.<sup>93</sup> It is simply impossible to adopt this view from an internal, subjective perspective without dissociation.

This problem is not recognised by Foucauldians who respond to the charge that Foucault espouses a directionless conception of politics by claiming that these critics are guilty of 'foundationalism'. Jon Simons, for example, says:

Foucault's critics delineate some of the constraining parameters of humanist political philosophy by grounding themselves in the limits of truth, value, future and subject. In so doing, they arm themselves with regulative principles that allow them to declare that some exercises of

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<sup>92</sup> Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, p.18.

<sup>93</sup> Note that while one could include beliefs about truth and morality within one's explanation of conflict, but regard these as 'ideological' as Marx did, the problem here is that of integrating this into one's own practical standpoint.

power are excessive while some others are just. These principles are presented as neutral standards of judgement that stand outside political contest, just as the pre-modern sovereign claimed to be above the disputes he adjudicated. However, such philosophical judgements about the proper limits of power conceal and involve other exercises of power. It is as if elaborate philosophical fortresses had been built to repel the enemy of excessive power, but it had been overlooked that some enemies were already within the gates and that the effort to build the walls killed some citizens.<sup>94</sup>

The claim here is that Foucault's critics do not see that their objections already rest on contestable, or 'political' choices. By this Simons means that they are already exercises of power. But this is not only to adopt a reductive attitude to morality, but also to fail to grasp that we cannot make this reductive attitude part of our first order, subjective view of the world.

Given that conceptual pluralism gives us reason to suppose that contestability is an inevitable part of our conceptual repertoire, does this not mean that a consistent pluralist must adopt this position? This depends on how we understand contestability. On the reductive understanding proposed above, ideas are contestable because the discourses in which they are situated are themselves products of conflict. As Simons argues, the arguments of Foucault's critics are already exercises of power. However, the view outlined in Chapter Two is not one which is reductive in this way; on the contrary, it is supposed that there may be reasons counting on both sides of an argument about some disputed object. To suppose that there is no reasonable way to secure agreement in such situations is very different from supposing that disagreements are 'really' just power struggles. Far from adopting this reductive view, we might instead argue that in such situations it is improper to press one's interlocutor

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<sup>94</sup> Jon Simons, *Foucault and the Political*. (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.66-7.

to accept one's own view of the matter at hand, lest reason give way to manipulation.<sup>95</sup> Recognition of contestability therefore has a place *within* reasonable deliberation: it does not expose it as no more than an attempt to bend others to one's will.

Paul Ricoeur has called the interpretive strategies of thinkers like Marx and Nietzsche 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' on account of the way they are designed to 'unmask' the operation of power in our institutions, traditions, and even identities.<sup>96</sup> In this way, they depart from the positive evaluation of tradition found in traditionalist hermeneutics. The suggestion that tradition may be problematic in this way, that it is not only the case that we are not wholly transparent to ourselves because we are situated, but also that this may be concealing the extent to which power is being exerted over us, is a valuable one and a useful antidote to rosy communitarian accounts of tradition. However, this valuable insight is promptly squandered by the reductive, debunking strategy adopted by the hermeneutics of suspicion. By exposing truth and morality either as the products of class domination or of the more anonymous workings of Foucauldian 'power', radical social critics cut the ground out from under their own feet, effectively denying their own critique any epistemic or moral force. By adopting reductive explanations of our concepts, radical social critics rob themselves of the means necessary to convince their audience that their beliefs, identities and institutions are in need of revision. Marxists have characteristically failed to acknowledge the way in which historical materialism undermined Marxist social criticism itself, either by failing to include Marxism within its objective description of the world, or by flatly denying that the resulting account of our concepts is relativist.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See Charles Larmore's insistence that liberals, encountering persistent disagreement of this sort, will cease to press their point and seek to contain this disagreement by seeking agreement at another level. Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity, p.53.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Ricoeur, Lectures on Ideology and Utopia, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.93.

<sup>97</sup> Husami and Wood both seem to think that the claim that moral norms are relative to particular social relations is not a relativist view. Geras, likewise, chooses to read Marx as a 'moral realist'. Husami, 'Marx on distributive justice'; Wood, 'The Marxian critique of justice'; and Geras, 'The controversy about Marx and justice.'



Foucauldians, by contrast, while arguably not reductive with respect to truth, lapse into a reductive view with respect to morality and go on to explicitly affirm the unavoidability of a non-moral personal aesthetic and an 'agonistic' politics. While this may be more consistent than the Marxist approach, it does nonetheless involve Foucauldian genealogy in a claim to absoluteness which it cannot make good.

We should reject the global debunking strategy of the hermeneutics of suspicion because it relies on the claim that a certain range of socio-historical description provides an absolute conception of the world, one which privileges a reflective stance with respect to the world and which excludes the possibility of a moral point of view. The attempts made to combine this particular reflective stance with the subjective, agent point of view, inevitably result in problems of dissociation. That is to say, the view from which our concepts are effects of power and the view from which we employ these in coping with the world cannot be combined. However, the problematising of tradition and situation which these projects have contributed to is valuable. A social criticism which is premised on conceptual pluralism, premised, that is on the idea that no range of description can be shown to be absolute, can exploit this insight because it regards the account provided by socio-historical contextualisation as inevitably incomplete. Limiting the application of socio-historical descriptions in this way does not entail the view that these are irrelevant to social criticism, as if we were simply to reintroduce an unproblematic fact/value distinction. Recognition that this is only one possible way of describing or relating to the world is the necessary preliminary to the attempt to combine socio-historical reflection with the subjective moral and epistemic standpoint of the agent. It is from this standpoint that we weigh the information provided by socio-historical reflection by employing our beliefs about what constitute justified beliefs and from this standpoint that we can bring to bear our values and principles in order to judge what aspects of our situation, as described in socio-historical terms, are ethically problematic. In place of a debunking but self-defeating hermeneutics of suspicion we can have a social criticism which is prepared to transform the contexts in which we are situated but which is

grounded in a pluralism which enables it to coherently exploit a complex of different standpoints and descriptions.

This Chapter has examined the two leading forms of radical, transformative, social criticism and their relation to each other. It has been argued that, while the popularity of Foucauldian genealogy is based on its rejection of Marxist economic reductionism, there is, nonetheless a basic and problematic continuity between these styles of social criticism, namely, their opposition to normative deliberation. This is expressed in their respective insistence on exposing the normative standpoint itself as an effect or instrument of power. They both employ contextualisation as a means to effect potentially transformative redescription, but see socio-historical contextualisation and normative deliberation as mutually exclusive, a position they share with Quentin Skinner. The next Chapter will argue that socio-historical contextualisation and normative deliberation may, however, be combined in the form of an interpretive social criticism. This, in turn, it will be argued, must play a central role in the conduct of impartial public deliberation.

## CHAPTER SIX

### DELIBERATION AND SOCIAL CRITICISM

How should we understand the relationship between liberal egalitarian politics and the idea of context? Existing contextualisms have been shown to be hostile to such politics insofar as they oppose impartial morality. This Chapter sets out a model of deliberative politics derived from a commitment to equality and embodying the idea of impartial public justification. My contention is that this model of politics can accommodate the concerns of contextualists, about the abstract character of universalist theory, and their concerns with the recognition of identities on one hand and the need to transform these, on the other. With the right understanding of 'context' - one that rests on a conceptual pluralism and a public conception of meaning, we can dismiss 'conceptual' arguments against impartial deliberation, while at the same time coming to appreciate how the sort of objective socio-historical reflection upon our situations can come to play a role in such deliberation.

It will be argued that a critical morality can make use of socio-historical interpretation in both the application of principles to particular contexts, which is to say, judgement, and also in the criticism of theories and principles themselves. This will rely on conceptual pluralist arguments to set out a view of situated, but critical morality. On the second point, it will be argued that an ethics of social criticism must respond to two different ethical imperatives: one requiring a respect for pluralism; and one requiring a sensitivity to the possibility that beliefs and identities may be products of unequal power relationships. These conflict insofar as a concern that identities and beliefs may reflect an adaptation to existing inequalities will require us to challenge rather than simply respect others' self-understandings. The task is to show: (1) how socio-historical contextualisation can be combined with moral deliberation and (2) to provide an account of the principles of moral deliberation which balances the demands

of recognition and transformation. No existing model of social criticism meets these requirements. A model that can must rely first of all on conceptual pluralism, and secondly on a model of public reason which embodies an ethical pluralism in the form of an impartial conception of public deliberation.

### *Critical Morality and Contextualisation: an interpretive social criticism*

In this section a model of interpretative social criticism will be set out. This relies on the conceptual pluralism and the pragmatic account of interpretation set out in Chapter Two in order to resist the reductive claims made by contextualists on behalf of socio-historical contextualisation. This establishes that claims for the precedence of particularising descriptions, or for the precedence of a socio-historical, descriptive/explanatory standpoint over that of normative deliberation, cannot be made good. Having set out this interpretive pluralism, what remains is to indicate how socio-historical contextualisation may be connected to normative deliberation. In line with the pragmatic account of interpretation set out in Chapter Two, the nature of this connection is established by asking what sort of problem brings into play both contextual and normative considerations. This, it will be argued, is the problem of revising judgements and their normative bases. Insofar as judgements both bring contextual and normative considerations into play and themselves take place within the context of institutionalised languages and problematics, then the revision of these judgements and the reorientation of actions may be effected by a contextualist social criticism directed both at the objects of judgement and the terms in which judgements are made. It is the fact that our practical activity takes place in the context of traditions and institutions which are never wholly transparent to us that gives interpretive social criticism its purchase.

The idea of 'context' appears to present us with an unpalatable choice between two extremes. We can choose between a 'situated' morality which is embedded in a rich

social and historical context, and which is in consequence both realistic and practical, taking as its starting point the actual beliefs of actual moral agents, or we can have a critical 'universalism' which is not relativist in the way that 'situated' morality is, but which purchases its rigour at the cost of abstraction from the 'real' world and which is in consequence impractical. The aim of this thesis is to support this 'universalist', critical, cosmopolitan, morality from the contextualist challenge. This does not mean that we should reject 'contextual' considerations altogether, but rather that we need to understand better how to combine a sensitivity to context with a critical morality. The contextualisms considered here are unacceptable on account of their relativism and traditionalism, but there must be a way of acknowledging the situated character of moral deliberation which does not surrender the critical force of universalist morality but rather can draw on socio-historical contextualisation to enrich our moral deliberations.

The first step in dismantling this opposition between realistic relativism and impractical universalism is to expose the foundationalist character of particularist understandings of morality. The claim that morality is no more than a set of culturally specific practices and traditions is simply reductive: while we can describe morality in this way this does not mean that this is the only way that we think of it, still less that this is the most perspicuous way to think about it. As argued in Chapter Two, the appropriateness of a description cannot be established *a priori*, but must rather be established with reference to a particular question or problem. The descriptions which serve the anthropologist or the historian are not necessarily those which are most useful for the deliberations of the moral agent, who cannot simply suspend her belief in the need to distinguish between true and false beliefs and right and wrong principles. It is not only, however, that such descriptions are not helpful: we might argue that if they are indeed true, then it is right that we should revise our beliefs accordingly. Besides the fact that this raises the usual problem about the coherence of relativism, namely, that if it is true it is false, there is also the more general problem of the foundationalist assumption on which this relativism rests. To assume that describing morality as

fundamentally a social practice reveals the basic truth about it is to assume that this range of description and the standpoint from which it is offered is ultimately more basic than the standpoint from which we see the point of moral deliberation and seek to guide our actions with reference to moral principles. But this claim can never be made good because it assumes the very relationship of concepts to the world which it must explain if the foundational character of this range of description is to be demonstrated. Given that no such demonstration can be provided without circularity, we do not have to accept the particularist claim that morality is no more than a social practice, relative to particular societies. This does not mean that we cannot describe morality in those terms, nor that historical and sociological accounts of our beliefs are never helpful, but it does mean that we are not bound to forego a critical morality in order to be sociologically realistic.

Doesn't the conceptual pluralism which undermines particularism also undermine critical morality by showing that we cannot demonstrate that there is a single moral principle or value which all rational persons must acknowledge as fundamental? Yes, it does, but as was argued in Chapter Four, a critical, cosmopolitan morality has no need of this foundationalist assumption: we don't have to choose between particularism and foundationalism. If we adopt a constructivist account of morality, in which moral principles are constructed rather than discovered in our culture's traditions, or in some realm of Platonic ideas, then we can set out a morality which provides a sufficiently objective basis for criticising our traditions and individual judgements, without the assumption that all rational persons must agree on a fundamental principle or value.

A constructivist account of morality can acknowledge the situated character of moral reasoning, while insisting that morality be critical. What can it gain from socio-historical accounts interpretation though, once it is recognised that such interpretation cannot take the place of moral justification? The way to approach this question is by means of the pragmatic idea that we relate to the world as agents, rather than as detached spectators. Moral deliberation is not a matter of discovering moral truths, but

of 'bringing an objective view into the determination of our conduct', a matter of guiding our actions according to objective principles.<sup>1</sup> If we view moral deliberation as a matter of solving moral problems, we can get a clearer sense of how socio-historical interpretations of the world may come to bear on our deliberations. Such interpretations are not thought of as metaphysically fundamental, but rather are called upon to resolve questions which bear on our moral problems. What sort of questions might such interpretations address and how do these relate to moral deliberation?

The moral agent is situated in a particular society, constituted by a particular set of institutions and traditions and inhabited by persons with a particular range of identities. Problems are themselves open to interpretation, and we can take our interpretations in either of two directions: we can choose to particularise through entering social or historical distinctions, or we can choose to abstract from these particularities by seeking more general descriptions of the problem at hand, by identifying it as an instance of *this* type of problem rather than *that*. Abstraction and particularising description are equally valid tools, and in our deliberations we typically employ both. While theorising is primarily thought of as treating problems in relatively abstract terms, it is worth noting that abstraction and particularisation are relative to what one is conceptualising and consequently socio-historical interpretation can itself employ particularising and relatively abstracting descriptions in order to distinguish or identify phenomena.

This sort of interpretation enters moral deliberation in the first instance because as moral agents we respond to the world under certain descriptions. That is to say, moral problems are not presented to us pure, and uninterpreted, but rather they rely on how a given situation is interpreted. Whether  $\chi$  presents us with a moral dilemma at all, and then if it does, what sort of dilemma it is depends as much upon how we describe  $\chi$  as it does on the content of our moral beliefs. One interpretation of the situation at hand seems to require the application of one principle, while another interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> This rather Kantian formulation is that of Thomas Nagel in The View from Nowhere, p.139.

may require that we act on another principle. Judgement, which is to say, bringing general principles to bear upon particular situations, requires us not only to have a theoretical grasp of the relations of priority pertaining between the various moral principles which we recognise, but also that we have a sound understanding of the situation we are faced with. Moral judgement goes awry not only because of theoretical errors in our system of moral beliefs, but also because our understanding of the world is itself deficient. A concern to make sound judgements will lead us to be concerned with the correct interpretation of the identities, traditions and institutions which we bring our principles to bear upon. Sometimes this can be a matter of presenting facts about these of which we were not previously aware, but it can also be a matter of providing better, more comprehensive interpretations of the situation at hand. The role of socio-historical interpretation is that of redescribing the familiar social world which faces us in ways which call into question our judgements about it. By describing the family, for example, in ways which bring out aspects of it which resemble apparently unrelated phenomena we are called upon to bring new principles to bear in our judgements about it. This has happened in response to the work of feminists, who not only draw attention to the existence of domestic violence but also to the redescription of this in ways which render it identical with other forms of assault, e.g., as upon a stranger in the street, in order to place in question the 'domestic' qualification which has traditionally determined a different moral response to such incidents.<sup>2</sup> Equally, housework has been redescribed in ways which connect it to the operation of the wider economy and which raise questions about the way in which the benefits produced by this labour have been distributed.<sup>3</sup>

Description and redescription are fundamental to moral judgement. The construction of historical and sociological accounts of the world in which we deliberate serves us by rendering the familiar unfamiliar and *vice versa* in ways which are morally

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<sup>2</sup> For example, R.E. Dobash and R. Dobash Violence Against Wives, (New York: The Free Press, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Oakley, Housewife, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).



relevant. That is to say, these accounts help to determine which principles we ought to act on in a given situation: whether we should regard the family as falling within the scope of principles of justice, or whether our economic institutions are characterised by freedom of choice or domination and control? The solution to such problems relies as much on 'thick' socio-historical interpretation of the sort of world we live in as much as it does on the theoretical analysis of our moral beliefs.

However, to restrict socio-historical interpretation to the sphere of the application of moral principles would not adequately recognise the usefulness of this style of interpretation. We can extend it to the analysis of ideas and theories themselves, without displacing the idea that arguments still require justification in moral and epistemic terms. Quentin Skinner sought to separate these two stances, in order to preserve the historicity of political argument, while Walzer and Rorty displaced the idea of justification by blurring the line between it and the interpretation of traditions of thought. Even critical morality can gain, however, from genealogical treatments of ideas. How can posing questions about the historical development of our beliefs be related to questions about the validity of those beliefs?

We must go back to the hermeneutic idea that the world is always already interpreted and that in our deliberations we are, in Gadamer's words, 'always on our way'. What this means is that not only are the objects of our concern, the identities and institutions which we seek to judge, already presented to us in particular ways, but also that the terms in which we pose our moral and theoretical questions about these objects are themselves given to us by tradition. Our questions, as was argued in Chapter Four, in the discussion of hermeneutics, are posed against the backdrop of traditional problematics which we have inherited without necessarily fully understanding. This does not simply mean that we do not know the history of the questions we are posing, but also, crucially, that we may not fully appreciate the way this history continues to operate upon the way we pose our questions. The relationship between the world and the moral and theoretical questions we pose as we try to cope

with it is basically circular in that we encounter a world already problematised in particular ways.

What we inherit from traditions of thought are particular ways of posing questions about the world which rest on particular complexes of distinctions, which we can find ourselves employing without our necessarily being aware that we are doing so. The role of a genealogy of philosophical ideas is to bring out the particular constitution of a current problem, revealing the nature of the conceptual complex which constitutes it by tracing how the schemes involved came to be mapped onto one another. We could imagine a genealogy of the problem of context being provided which set out how the contrast between the abstract and the particular came to be mapped onto the contrast between the practical and the impractical and then onto the further contrast between contextualism and universalism.

The history of liberalism provides a good example of how the structure of a theory can be called into question by contextualisation, which is to say, how aspects of that theory may be redescribed in such a way as to make them candidates for revision. Liberalism has come in for considerable criticism for its conception of the individual, and the way that this concept figures within liberal political theory to exclude certain sorts of problem. For Marxists like Macpherson, the liberal individual is shaped by the assumptions underlying market society, chiefly in the way that the individual's basic relationship to the world and to himself is conceived as one of ownership.<sup>4</sup> Feminist critics, such as Carol Pateman, argue that not only is the individual conceived in these possessive terms, but also as characteristically male. For this reason, she argues, feminists ought not simply to aim at achieving recognition for women as 'individuals' because 'the individual is a patriarchal category'.<sup>5</sup> To this we might add the communitarian objection to the conception of the individual as an 'atom', without ties

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<sup>4</sup> C. B. Macpherson claims that the defining feature of possessive individualism 'is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, owing nothing to society for them.' Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Carol Pateman, The Sexual Contract. (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), p.184.

to the society and culture around him.<sup>6</sup> Closely connected to this is the Foucauldian objection that the individual is not a pre-political figure, whose choices can be used to construct a theory of political legitimacy, as contractarians suppose, but is already a product of power relations.<sup>7</sup>

These critics regard their contextualisations of liberal theory as counting against liberalism *per se*. Liberals can respond however, by revising their conception of the individual, distinguishing it from these particular conceptualisations of individualism which have served to undermine the 'universalism' of liberal theory: the idea of the individual as owner, not worker, as male, not female, as pre-social, not social, as transparent, not opaque. Liberals can acknowledge gender differences between individuals; they can refuse to accept the idea that respecting individual freedom necessarily means respecting private property; they can acknowledge the situated character of individuals, and the implications this can have for preference formation.<sup>8</sup>

Because contextualisation need not render a body of thought unusable, as Marxists might have hoped the exposure of the 'liberalism' as bourgeois ideology would have done, it does not mean that it is irrelevant to theory construction. Without contextualist challenges to the central concepts of liberalism, the need for revision would not have been recognised. Contextualisation can serve to bring to light certain characteristic sets of uses of a term which either prompt us to abandon it altogether, or to reinterpret it by eliminating certain of these uses, certain contrasts which are deemed

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, 'Atomism' in Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.187-210.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Simons, for example, claims that 'liberalism is a set of practices for the constitution of subjects.' Simons, Foucault and the Political, p.58.

<sup>8</sup> See Susan Moller-Okin's liberal feminism in Justice, Gender, and the Family, (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Will Kymlicka's acknowledgement of situation in Liberalism, Community and Culture, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Joshua Cohen on adaptive preferences in 'Deliberation and democratic legitimacy, in The Good Polity, Alan Hamlin and Phillip Pettit (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp.17-34; and Rawls on the way that 'the difference principle represents, in effect, an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as a common asset and to share in the benefits of this distribution whatever it turns out to be.' This clearly sets his liberalism apart from that of John Locke. Rawls, A Theory of Justice, p.101.

unacceptable. As a liberal, I favour a reinterpretation rather than a rejection of liberal individualism, but the general point to note here is that contextualisation of a term, the construction of a narrative of the various ways in which it has been used and the way this has determined the way it is currently used, can be of central importance to theory construction, not merely a historical ornament.<sup>9</sup>

This does not exclude the sort of study promoted by Quentin Skinner: my account is pragmatic, which is to say, interest driven. It aims at showing how, if we hope to effect social change through revising beliefs, we can make use of socio-historical contextualisation. The level of description primarily employed in this project will most likely be one which enables us to connect diverse statements, texts and practices in order to reveal continuities and discontinuities at the level of traditions, ideologies, or discourses. This is because social criticism relies upon the idea that one's current beliefs and actions are never wholly transparent, but rather can be redescribed in a variety of hitherto unsuspected ways. Typically, this will entail identifying one's acts and beliefs as instances of some larger whole, a tradition, for example. The precise categories required to characterise such complexes of ideas and beliefs will depend on the needs of the particular project that we are engaged upon. Sometimes we will want to reveal continuities while at other times we may hope to redescribe by focusing on discontinuities. On some occasions we may choose to focus on a body of thought alone while at other times we may wish to focus on the particular practices it gave rise to and which, in turn, may have modified it. For such purposes a scheme such as Foucault's 'discursive formation' may be most helpful. The point insisted upon here is that whatever categories we employ, social criticism must be free to make use of generalising and well as particularising abstractions if it is to effectively redescribe and it must be free also to connect historical and normative problems rather than pursuing

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<sup>9</sup> A good example of how a historical interpretation can reveal the particular features of a current problem is provided by Kymlicka's analysis of the way that the problem of 'multiculturalism' came to be posed as a problem of 'inclusion' on account of the way that the paradigm case was understood to be that of the black population of the US. To the extent that multiculturalist arguments centred on the inclusion/exclusion scheme, the problem of autonomy vs. assimilation could not be recognised. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, pp.140-7.

one to the exclusion of the other. If, like Quentin Skinner, we choose to pursue some other aim in our investigations, for example, the recovery of authorial intentions, then this is by no means ruled out by this account of pragmatic contextualisation and interpretive social criticism. My argument with the version of the history of political thought advanced by Skinner is only that its intentionalist focus specifically excluded the possibility of the sort of reinterpretation necessary to the conduct of social criticism.

A historical narrative of the development of a theoretical problem can always be provided. Sometimes it has little bearing on how we define that problem, but on other occasions, as with multiculturalism, it can have a bearing on our understanding of the problem itself by revealing the assumptions which came to be built into it. This does not of itself invalidate those assumptions of course, but it does bring them to light and clears the way for us to judge whether they are still useful or not. In this way we can benefit as theorists from the construction of historical narratives about our theoretical ideas, without surrendering the contrast between narrative and justification.

### *The Ethics of Social Criticism*

Having shown what redescription has to offer morality, I want to approach the second question, namely, what sort of morality should direct our redescriptions? Clearly, redescription without morality is arbitrary: this was the flaw of Foucauldian genealogy, i.e. that the critique of identity *per se* was directionless in that it lacked any means to distinguish between identities in need of revision and those which may be judged to be legitimate and worthy of respect. Rorty restricted redescription to the private sphere on the grounds that redescribing others was potentially cruel, but this was judged too restrictive in that it did not allow for the possibility of legitimate challenges to the self-understandings of others. Redescription needs to be directed by moral principles if it is not to be simply arbitrary. Everything can be redescribed and in

an almost infinite number of ways: what we need is some account of why a description or redescription of something is relevant, and the interest of the moral subject in making sound moral judgements provides one way of determining the relevance of a redescription. Now we need to work out what sort of moral principles we can bring into play.

First we must review the sort of ethical problems posed whenever an appeal to 'context' is made. Appeals to the idea that we are situated in particular social and historical contexts and that our identities and beliefs are shaped by social institutions and traditions tend to emphasise one or other of two ideas. Firstly, the idea of context signifies pluralism: we appeal to context in order to draw attention to some difference or other in beliefs or practices. Secondly, the idea that we are situated in a context tends to raise the issue of opacity, which is to say, the way in which our identities and beliefs are constructed 'behind our backs' by social forces outside our control. Each aspect of situation poses a different ethical problem. The idea of plurality is emphasised by those who are concerned with the recognition of and respect for differences, while the idea of opacity is emphasised by those who worry about the way in which unequal power relations can shape our beliefs and identities unbeknownst to us. An adequate ethics of redescription will have to address both concerns. As it stands, no existing model of social criticism does this.

Those concerned with the recognition of differences worry that if we are not sensitive to context - if we are 'universalists' - then we will overlook the way in which the outlooks of persons of different genders, or with different cultural backgrounds differ. We should resist the temptation to challenge the self-understandings of others in particular, for to do so is to fail to treat them with equal respect. 'Universalism', is regarded as lacking the requisite sensitivity to context and difference and consequently risks becoming a form of authoritarianism. Rorty worries that if we challenge others' self-descriptions we may simply be acting cruelly, and Walzer fears that if we do not recognise the cultural specificity of our moral beliefs, then we will end up simply *imposing* our beliefs upon others. Feminist standpoint theorists not only assume that

gender difference entails a difference of belief, but also that it entails the immunity of these beliefs to criticism: self-understandings are peculiarly authoritative because we are transparent to ourselves. This leads Stanley and Wise, for example, to adopt the extreme view discussed in Chapter Three, that if a battered woman does not believe herself to be oppressed then, quite simply, she is not oppressed. Standpoint theorists and communitarians differ in their theoretical understanding of the nature of situation and plurality, but they agree in their response to plurality, namely that we ought not to challenge the self-descriptions of others for to do so exemplifies a lack of respect for them.

I have argued against the theoretical bases for this self-restraint, namely, the idea that we are transparent to ourselves and that we cannot communicate our self-understanding to others, and the idea that we cannot judge the beliefs and practices of others impartially. I share the concern of radical social critics that unequal power relations can shape our identities and beliefs without our being aware of it and that consequently, we should not regard anyone's self-understanding as immune to criticism. Radical social critics point to the way that our situation can conceal inequality from us and to the possibility that we may have adapted ourselves and our preferences to these unequal circumstances. This concern motivates not only the traditional Marxist focus on the conservatism of the working class, but also the concerns of many feminists with the ways in which gender identities are constructed in such a way as to sustain inequality. Ultimately this is the concern lying behind Foucault's interest in subjectivisation and the construction of models of normal subjectivity, although, to be sure, he would probably not present his work in quite this way. If we appreciate the extent to which our self-understandings may be implicated in unequal social relations in ways which either oppress us or involve us in the subordination of others, then we will be sceptical about the claim that equal respect requires us to refrain from challenging the self-understandings of others. Instead, we will be inclined to argue that a commitment to equality must not only allow that we can challenge the self-understandings of others, but also that sometimes it demands that we

must so challenge them, and of course, by the same token, that we expose ourselves and our own understandings to challenge as well.

Somehow we must work out a normative conception of social criticism which balances the demand for recognition with sensitivity to the way our self-understanding can be implicated in unequal social relations. I have argued in Chapters Three and Four that a blanket demand for respect for the self-understandings of others rests on an inadequate interpretation of what the requirement to treat others as equals entails. Placing self-understandings of others beyond criticism also places one's own self-understanding beyond criticism by others, and it therefore embodies a profound indifference to others, not respect. Equality requires that one place oneself 'at risk' in conversation, in Gadamer's phrase, and this exposes the self-understandings of all to public scrutiny. This interpretation of equal respect is strengthened by the sort of considerations presented by non-standpoint theory feminists, Marxists, and Foucauldians, which indicate that self-understandings may embody adaptation to unequal circumstances. Respecting others' beliefs about themselves would permit their continued acquiescence to inequality. This form of 'respect' would permit inequality to go unchallenged and for this reason it must be regarded as an inadequate interpretation of the demand that we treat others as equals.

Having determined that treating others as equals can entail challenging their self-understandings and, by the same token, exposing one's own self-understanding to challenge, we must recognise that the demand that we recognise differences in perspective does address a real problem: namely the danger of authoritarianism. The contextualist critique of the sort of 'universalism' which does not recognise the plurality of perspectives present in or across societies is directed at the danger that this lack of attention to plurality will result in an interpretive and in consequence, political authoritarianism. We must allow the possibility that people do not always understand themselves in ways which serve their best interests, but we should be wary of simply imposing our interpretations upon them even where we do so with the aim of helping them to escape their oppression. One example of an issue about which there may be



reasonable disagreement of this sort is that of the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women. On one hand, this can reasonably be interpreted as an oppressive practice when it is imposed as it is in Afghanistan at present, but when it is chosen by Muslim schoolgirls in French schools, then the ban on these signs of religious affiliation by the authorities might well be thought to raise questions about respect for religious differences by the French state.<sup>10</sup>

Is redescribing others essentially authoritarian? One could simply disagree privately with another's self-understanding, for example, and this would seem to raise no particular threat of authoritarianism. However, if one fears that another's self-understanding actually obscures their true interests from them, and ensures their continuing subordination, then it would appear that one has an obligation to raise this possibility with them rather than keeping it to oneself. Of course, should they disagree, we may then simply refrain from pressing the matter any further. This may not be wholly satisfactory, but it fulfils one's obligation to alert one's interlocutor to the possibility that they may be misinterpreting themselves and their interests and it does not seem to raise a problem of authoritarianism. But what of situations in which the self-understanding which one challenges is not that of an oppressed group, but that of a member of a group which benefits from the oppression of others. Clearly it would not be permissible to raise the matter and then refrain from further action in the face of dissent. While we might judge in the first case that we should respect our interlocutor's right to judge whether to accept our redescription of their situation, even where we think they are wrong to do so, it would be wrong to adopt this position in the second case. Given that the self-interpretation of our second interlocutor entails treating others as less than equal, this person has no right to continue to act on this interpretation, and we have an obligation to those who are affected by his actions to intervene in such a case. Imagine for example the self-understandings of those white South Africans who supported the regime of apartheid: an identity based on a belief in racial superiority

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<sup>10</sup> N.C. Moruzzi, 'A problem with headscarves: contemporary complexities of political and social identity,' *Political Theory* 22 (1994), pp.653-72.

and implicated in social and political institutions designed to sustain racial inequality could not be a candidate for respect. Sometimes, then, we have to adopt coercive policies derived from our interpretation of the situation concerned, and where coercion follows from our interpretations, then we must be concerned with guarding against authoritarianism.

This latter situation is perhaps the defining context for a specifically social criticism. That is to say, social criticism is social not only because it is situated in a particular context but also because it is addressed to society at large. Because it is social in this second sense it is distinct from individual moral deliberation, distinct from deliberation about my personal conduct. 'Social' criticism by contrast, is addressed to the problem of collective action and consequently entails the potential coercion of some members of society. Where coercion is at stake, the problem of authoritarian redescription becomes pressing.

If we look at the four models of social criticism discussed above: feminist standpoint theory; Walzerian interpretation of shared traditions; Marxist ideology-critique; and Foucauldian genealogy, it would appear that social criticism is indeed understood as something distinct from strictly individual deliberation. In feminist standpoint theory the epistemically privileged standpoint of women is supposed to contribute to the reordering of society at large. Walzer treats social criticism as a form of public activity directing the affairs of political communities. Marx does not conceive of ideology critique as forming part of political deliberation as politics is a form of alienation, but ideology critique, like Hartsock's standpoint theory is supposed to contribute to a process of social revolution with clear implications for class identities and self-understandings. Foucauldian genealogy is perhaps the odd one out insofar as genealogy is neither intended as an element of the political process, nor as part of a revolutionary strategy. Even if it is informed chiefly by Foucault's anarchistic aestheticism it still appears to be connected to 'political' struggles in the sense that even the personal aesthetic is inextricably connected to wider networks of power and will

inevitably involve the aesthetic subject in at least 'local', 'tactical' struggles to reconfigure existing power relations.

While all these models of social criticism regard such criticism as in some way directed at collective problems, this has not meant that social, or public deliberation is clearly distinguished from individual deliberation. In one way, this is because radical social criticism has, as we have seen in Chapter Five, tended to avoid or even reject moral deliberation *per se*, with the consequence that it has tended to focus on epistemic or simply instrumental problems in place of moral questions. Even on a moralised interpretation of these projects, however, it is still hard to see how a distinction between individual and public deliberation could be elaborated. This is because the device of distinguishing the two relies on the distinctively liberal concern with working out a system of principles under which persons with diverse moral outlooks may live. That is to say that we would only distinguish between individual and public deliberation if we supposed that persons might reasonably differ in their moral outlooks and that consequently the principles appealed to in deliberation about potentially coercive collective decisions must differ from those appealed to in deliberating about problems of individual conduct. To simply impose decisions justified only in terms of one particular moral outlook would be to violate the norm of equal respect.

'Social' criticism poses special problems with respect to redescription to the extent that (1) it involves collective and therefore coercive decision-making and (2) to the extent that we recognise reasonable pluralism. This is distinct from simple pluralism, in the sense that it is held not only that a plurality of beliefs pertains but that at least some of this plurality is reasonable, and consequently must be respected.<sup>11</sup> Existing models of social criticism risk authoritarianism to the extent that they fail to recognise the existence of reasonable pluralism in person's perspectives. Hartsock's standpoint theory fails to recognise differences between women with respect to their

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<sup>11</sup> The contractualist device for determining the limits of the 'reasonable' will be set out below.

perspectives. The pluralising response to 'universalism' within standpoint theory then reproduces this sort of 'universalism' at lower levels to the extent that differences between black women or between lesbians are not recognised but subsumed under the rubric of distinct 'black' or 'lesbian' standpoints. Walzer's social criticism while 'political' in the sense that it plays a part in the public deliberation of particular political communities, makes the mistake of locating pluralism at the inter-state level, demanding respect only for differences between political communities and ignoring differences within them. Only where the possibility of internal differences is recognised does the question of distinguishing between public and private justifications arise. Finally, Marxism, in its ethical version, is wedded to an Aristotelian perfectionism, and is consequently unable to recognise reasonable pluralism, and it too runs the risk of sanctioning authoritarian re-description.

One bulwark against authoritarian re-description is provided by the anti-foundationalist account of interpretation outlined in Chapter Two. If we recognise the irreducible plurality and incompleteness of our interpretations, a recognition which must follow from the critique of the circularity of foundationalist claims, then we may be more hesitant to compel others to accept our interpretations or to adopt courses of action based on these interpretations which will have an impact on others. The conceptual pluralism of this understanding of interpretation does not do away with the idea of truth or the idea that we may distinguish between better or worse interpretations but it is at least open to the possibility of conflicting interpretation in a way that foundationalist understandings are not. This pluralism supports a fallibilist attitude to interpretation which provides some check to authoritarianism.

On its own, however, fallibilism is not sufficient. Firstly we need to adopt mechanisms which actually expose our interpretations to challenge from others. Fallibilism on its own amounts to no more than a willingness to accept that one may be wrong: it represents a position of openness to criticism. If we are to avoid misinterpretation, we will need more than a willingness to accept criticism, for this on its own may not lead to any revision of beliefs: we need the criticism itself. Fallibilism

simply points us in the right direction, namely that of deliberating with others in order to expose weaknesses in our interpretations.

There is, nonetheless, a deeper reason for deliberating with others than this. Deliberation in order to secure epistemic gains would find only an instrumental justification. The true reason for deliberating with others is not that we may learn from this interaction, although this is a welcome benefit. Rather, the reason we must deliberate with them is that where coercive measures are at issue, we treat those potentially affected as equals by deliberating with them about these measures. On its own, conceptual pluralism simply alerts us to the idea that our interpretations are only ever partial in the sense that they fall short of being comprehensive and that others may well interpret things differently. This may give us an instrumental reason for discussing our interpretations with others, but the idea of avoiding authoritarianism appeals rather to moral considerations and places us under an obligation to discuss our interpretations, at least those aimed at collective decision-making, with others.

The obligation to discuss one's interpretations with others is a necessary but not a sufficient element of the normative framework of social, that is to say, public, criticism. Consider the objections made to the political implications of standpoint theory made in Chapter Three. There it was argued that on account of the strong claims made for the transparency and authority of experience, standpoint theory was incompatible with deliberative conceptions of democracy because it reduced deliberation to 'testimony'. If deliberation can make no difference to one's position then it cannot safeguard against authoritarianism. Imagine a situation in which two groups, each proposing alternative courses of action based on distinct interpretations of a given situation, simply articulated their own understanding without taking the slightest interest in that of the other side. Following this 'exchange' the group which could marshal a majority simply proceeds to impose its favoured policy. This might meet a requirement to discuss one's interpretations with others, but would it be acceptable in terms of the principle from which this requirement was derived, and would we really call such an exchange 'deliberation'?

The idea of engaging in deliberation with others involves more than offering testimony about one's own perspective. It involves exposing one's own views to the criticism of others and a willingness to revise them in the light of this criticism. This is not just a matter of fallibilism, but of justice, and specifically of impartiality, which we might say, underlies the epistemic idea of fallibilism.<sup>12</sup> When parties deliberate impartially they are willing to criticise and accept criticism from others, where this involves a willingness to set aside the 'mineness' of the particular beliefs and interests in question. This does not mean surrendering either of these, but only that a precondition of fair deliberation is that each party be prepared to view their own position objectively, and to revise it where it is plain that viewed from this third personal perspective it is either wrong or cannot claim priority.

In summary then, social criticism must balance two sorts of concern: that with respecting reasonable differences and that with exposing adaptation to inequality. Because social criticism involves public deliberation, concerning collective decisions, it must adopt a distinct normative framework for coping with these competing moral imperatives and this framework is provided by the idea of impartial public deliberation. Existing models of social criticism fail to address these issues, either rejecting moral justification altogether or adopting a version of it which does not admit the possibility of reasonable pluralism.

### *Liberalism and Deliberative Democracy*

This account of a social criticism sensitive to pluralism connects deliberative democracy to liberal public reason, however, many deliberative democrats choose to contrast liberal and deliberative democracy. To clarify the nature of the connection, we

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<sup>12</sup> It seems plausible to connect the two, on the sort of pragmatic understanding of the interpenetration of fact, value and theory set out by pluralists such as Hilary Putnam. Our epistemic judgements, on this view are themselves normative inasmuch as they appeal to norms like consistency, impartiality, etc.: Putnam, Reason, Truth and History.

need to distinguish between several different arguments for deliberation. There are three types of justification for adopting a deliberative conception of democracy: Aristotelian, epistemic and egalitarian. Only the last of these provides the basis for a satisfactory account of deliberation, one which can incorporate the liberal distinction between public and private justification.

The first sort of argument for favouring deliberation is provided by the basically Aristotelian conviction that the life of the active citizen, of political participation, is the best life for human beings. This view is found in theorists like Hannah Arendt, for example, who regards the political sphere as distinct from social and economic institutions in that it affords citizens the opportunity for self-disclosure through action, something she regards as impossible in any other context.<sup>13</sup> Others, like Benjamin Barber, favour 'strong' participatory democracy because it suits our basically communal nature better than competitive, individualistic liberal politics.<sup>14</sup>

This sort of argument for deliberation is wedded to a contrast between direct and representative democracy. The former is generally agreed to be ill-suited to the complex division of labour which characterises modern states and to this extent the preference for participation and deliberation appears to be driven by an impractically nostalgic notion of politics. Connected to this is the problem that idealisations of the Greek polis tend to ignore the massive inequalities required to permit male Athenians to devote themselves to the life of the citizen. Secondly, the assumption that the life of political participation is more choiceworthy than any other is open to the value pluralist objection that there are equally valuable ways to live and that no single value can be

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<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). She makes it clear that she thinks politics should remain above the grubby business of redistributing wealth or even providing minimal guarantees of social welfare in *On Revolution*, (1963) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> Barber complains that 'Liberal democracy is based on premises about human nature, knowledge, and politics that are genuinely liberal but that are not intrinsically democratic. Its conception of the individual and of individual interest undermines the democratic practices upon which both individuals and their interests depend. Liberal democracy is thus a 'thin' theory of democracy, one whose democratic values are prudential and thus provisional, optional, and conditional - means to exclusively individualistic and private ends.' Barber, *Strong Democracy*.

shown to be the highest good for all human beings. Clearly, liberalism could not be compatible with this understanding of deliberation as it clashes with the Aristotelian view on the idea that there is a single way to live a good life. For liberals, politics is essentially concerned with constructing and maintaining common institutions in conditions of pluralism, conditions in which there is deep disagreement between citizens concerning their ideas of the best or the right way to live.

The second reason for favouring deliberation is 'epistemic'. James Fishkin argues that deliberative democracy will produce better decisions than those produced by the ill-informed preferences of electors and their representatives.<sup>15</sup> Fishkin does not contrast deliberative and representative conceptions of democracy, as Aristotelians do, but rather focuses on ways of making representative democracy more deliberative. Not only does he think of deliberative democracy as distinct from direct democracy, he even expresses doubts about the effectiveness of direct democracy in safeguarding deliberation: direct democracy is too prone to demagoguery, he suggests.<sup>16</sup> Deliberation is one of three key elements of an adequate conception of democracy: deliberation; formal equality; and non-tyranny, by which Fishkin means the avoidance of arbitrary rule. The value of deliberation is that in contrast to the 'inclinations of the moment' which are reflected in a purely preference based notion of democracy, deliberation produces 'public opinions that are refined by 'sedate reflection'.<sup>17</sup> Because the 'citizens of mass publics show little in the way of knowledge, sophistication, or consistency in their beliefs and opinions,' we should try to improve the quality of political decisionmaking by introducing deliberative elements into the political process.

The particular innovation which Fishkin suggests is that of the 'deliberative opinion poll' which will function like a 'citizens jury' in which selected citizens will be invited to discuss public issues with each other and then have the outcome of their

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<sup>15</sup> James Fishkin, Democracy and Deliberation.

<sup>16</sup> Fishkin, Democracy and Deliberation, p.50.

<sup>17</sup> Fishkin, Democracy and Deliberation, p.36.



deliberations publicised, in the hope that this will serve to improve the quality of the decisions made by voters and representatives alike. This sort of concern with institutional innovation is a growing part of the deliberative project as it must be if it is to amount to more than a nostalgia for direct democracy.<sup>18</sup>

Critics might wonder, however, whether the putative epistemic gains of discussion are sufficient to justify deliberation as an element of democracy, especially in view of Fishkin's admission that the emphasis on epistemic gain can conflict with political equality. If we are interested solely in improving the quality of decision-making we might deem it more efficient to consult experts rather than ordinary citizens, perhaps even adopting a form of corporatist democracy in which the input of these experts was given an institutional role. Obviously, Fishkin's own conception would not permit this, as this would be incompatible with the requirements of formal equality, but this underlines the way his theory seems to allow for a potential conflict between deliberation and equality.

Within Fishkin's theory, liberalism, in the person of Mill, is connected with deliberation, and the two contrasted with the requirements of political equality. As Fishkin notes, Mill was prepared to countenance plural voting, that is to say, additional votes for the educated in order to ensure that the quality of public debate be maintained. The connection here lies in the way liberals like Mill and deliberative democrats like Fishkin fear that democracy will lapse into populism and majoritarian tyranny. This reproduces the idea that liberals may be at best fair-weather friends of democracy, who would be equally happy with an enlightened despotism provided it respected private, negative liberties. Fishkin's account of deliberation does not contrast it with liberalism, but does provide an account which suggests that the deliberation itself may tend towards elitism rather than towards political equality.

The third justification for adopting a deliberative conception of democracy is couched in egalitarian terms. As with the epistemic conception of deliberation, the

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<sup>18</sup> See James Bohman, 'The coming of age of deliberative democracy,' Journal of Political Philosophy 6 (1998), pp.400-25.

contrast is not with representative democracy *per se*, but rather with interest-group politics, which is to say, the idea that politics is concerned with the aggregation of preferences. John Dryzek presents this in terms of a contrast between 'participatory' and 'liberal' democracy:

Although there is no simple dichotomy between liberal and participatory democracy, one can think of them as two major democratic possibilities. As one moves towards the participatory pole of the spectrum they help define, politics becomes increasingly discursive, educational, oriented to truly public interests, and needful of active citizenship. In contrast, the liberal pole is dominated by voting, strategy, private interests, bargaining, exchange, spectacle, and limited involvement.<sup>19</sup>

This contrast seems to reproduce elements of the first argument for deliberation, the classical, Aristotelian preference for direct democracy, for example, but Dryzek is not simply nostalgic for a lost past. He argues that while he should prefer to construct some sort of 'public space' other than the modern state, 'if the state, bureaucracy, private enterprise, and family are always going to be with us, then perhaps they merit democratising too.'<sup>20</sup> That is to say, like other deliberative democrats, he contemplates the introduction of deliberation into a variety of sites in modern society and not simply the reversion to small scale face-to-face communities in order to institute direct democracy. Equally, despite his remarks about the 'discursive and egalitarian classical conception of politics', he favours the sort of proceduralist approach to the choice of

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<sup>19</sup> John Dryzek, Discursive Democracy, p.13. See also Dryzek, Deliberative Democracy and Beyond.

<sup>20</sup> Dryzek, Discursive Democracy, p.220.

moral principles favoured by Habermas, rather than the neo-Aristotelian politics favoured by communitarians like MacIntyre.<sup>21</sup>

Dryzek's reliance upon the Frankfurt School is what shapes his preference for discursive over liberal democracy because on his view the latter embodies the notion of the 'instrumental rationalisation of society' which lay at the centre of their analysis of modernity. What is wrong with liberal democracy, understood in terms of party competition is that it reduces politics to strategic action, where realising one's goals takes precedence over other considerations such that public decisions made as the outcome of this competitive process would amount to little more than the coercion and manipulation of one's fellow citizens.<sup>22</sup> We can interpret Dryzek's opposition to interest group politics as based on a version of the injunction never to treat others simply as a means but rather as ends in themselves, that is, as based on the norm of equal respect, the same norm that prompted Gadamer's opposition to the idea of 'method'. A purely instrumental relationship to others, and by implication a politics centred on such relationships, violates the requirement to treat others as equals. By contrasting deliberative and interest-group politics in this way Dryzek arrives at a more satisfactory account of why we should prefer a deliberative conception of democracy. This account does not rely on the idea that the life of political participation is of more value than any other, and it avoids the potentially elitist consequences of the epistemic model of democracy: instead it relies on the idea that if we fail to deliberate with others on matters of collective concern, then we are not treating them as equals.

Can liberals recognise the force of this claim? Dryzek does not think so: he assumes that liberals are wedded to precisely the sort of preference aggregating politics

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<sup>21</sup> Dryzek, Discursive Democracy, p.184. For Habermas' constructivist idea that we choose principles which could be chosen as the outcome of deliberation in an 'ideal speech situation', See Habermas, 'Discourse ethics: notes on a program of philosophical justification,' in Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, (Cambridge MA: MIT, 1991)

<sup>22</sup> Instrumental rationality, Dryzek says, 'can only involve the instrumental manipulation and engineering of people (and nature). Discursive designs, in contrast, can facilitate a less manipulative and more symbiotic kind of problem-solving intelligence in political life.' Dryzek, Discursive Democracy, p.59.

to which he opposes deliberative democracy. Liberalism, in his eyes, is founded on the belief that 'individuals are mostly motivated by self-interest' and this gives rise to a preference for a style of politics which allows the pursuit of self-interest to proceed, restrained only by a set of minimal constitutional ground rules. Even the 'political liberalism' which has been formulated over the last decade or so, a liberalism which has become closely associated with deliberative democracy on account of its focus on the task of political justification in conditions of pluralism, is criticised by Dryzek for its complicity with 'the prevailing liberal political economy' and its constitutionalist minimalism which, he argues, is blunting the critical edge of deliberative democracy.<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that liberalism has been presented by many of its adherents as a fundamentally apolitical creed, concerned chiefly to protect the negative liberties of atomised individuals.<sup>24</sup> Clearly liberalism is not compatible with a 'classical' understanding of democracy, which assumes a single version of the good life, and it is traditionally regarded as having an ambiguous relationship even to representative democracy, as the example of Mill shows. However, the egalitarian defence of deliberative democracy seems to provide the sort of defence of democracy which overcomes the old contrast between equality and liberty and provides a basis for a reconciliation with contemporary egalitarian liberalism. Whatever about the liberal tradition, there is clearly no need for contemporary liberals to adhere to an interest group conception of politics. Dryzek caricatures liberals with the claim that the only motivation they acknowledge is self-interest: contemporary liberalism places at its centre the motivation to act justly.<sup>25</sup> The connection between liberalism and

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<sup>23</sup> Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, p.8.

<sup>24</sup> The locus classicus of this liberalism is Berlin's much discussed 'Two concepts of liberty', notable among other things for its portrayal of Kant as a proto-totalitarian. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*; Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). All take the view that persons can be motivated by a desire to act justly. The idea that self-interest is the only motive recognised by liberalism may owe something to Jeremy Bentham's 'two sovereign masters' but is almost entirely absent from contemporary liberalism.

deliberative democracy is provided precisely by the claim that acting justly requires us to engage in public deliberation. By setting out a normative conception of democracy which calls on equality to provide an argument against majoritarianism, instead of opposing it with an appeal to the value of liberty, deliberative democrats have cleared the way to reconceiving the relationship between liberalism and democracy. In turn, what liberalism can bring to this idea is a fuller specification of the norms which should govern deliberation itself, namely the idea that deliberation must respect pluralism and distinguish between public and private deliberation rather than proceeding on the assumption of a consensus on a system of values.

What liberalism brings to deliberative democracy is the idea of respecting pluralism, usually expressed in the idea that the state should not promote a particular conception of the good, but rather should provide a framework which makes it possible for citizens with a variety of conceptions of the good to live together. In response to the criticism that liberalism has simply sought to impose its own conception of the good life - that centred on private, negative liberty, under the guise of neutrality - liberals have sought to reformulate liberalism as a distinctively 'political' theory which rests on a distinction between reasons appropriate to private moral deliberation, and those appropriate to public, political justification.<sup>26</sup> Public justification is conceived in procedural terms instead of in terms of a substantive, shared conception of the good, in order to accommodate the maximum pluralism. It is not claimed, however, that this solution is neutral, as much as it is impartial, the distinction lying in the recognition that this proceduralism relies upon a commitment to the value of equality, rather than upon the bare idea of what reason requires. The liberal idea is that equality in conditions of pluralism requires us to be impartial.

As indicated above, the form of this procedure is provided by contractarianism, the idea of contract serving to express the ideas of equality and pluralism, insofar as it

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<sup>26</sup> See Charles Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity; Joshua Cohen, 'Deliberation and democratic legitimacy,' which Rawls includes within the canon of political liberalism, Political Liberalism, p.374n.

represents the idea that acceptable principles must be justified to others.<sup>27</sup> The construction set out by Thomas Scanlon is the one adopted here for public justification:

...that an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement.<sup>28</sup>

As Thomas Nagel points out, the condition of reasonable rejection is a relatively stringent one, compared with a condition like 'adoptability', the principle appealed to in Onora O'Neill's version of constructivism, for example.<sup>29</sup> The latter is designed to answer the charge that the search for universalisable principles entails a demand for uniformity. The condition of adoptability is deliberately weak in order to permit individuals to construct principles for guiding individual action which do not *require* others to adopt them: they are sufficiently objective if they are deemed to be *potentially* adoptable by others. This recognises that others, with different values, perhaps, may have good reasons to act on different principles.

The rejectability condition, by contrast, would seem to be better suited to public deliberation as it imposes a more stringent condition on the construction of principles, one that would eliminate many principles which would meet O'Neill's test. The first aims at rendering universalisability compatible with the maximum pluralism in individual conduct. However, to adopt it as a test for public reason would licence coercion on grounds which people might reject, while acknowledging them to be

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<sup>27</sup> Rawls presents the contractual device as useful insofar as it presents principles of justice as principles which would be chosen by 'rational' persons, i.e. that 'conceptions of justice may be explained and justified' and also because it contains the idea of a 'plurality' of persons and groups. Rawls, A Theory of Justice, p.16.

<sup>28</sup> Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.153.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Nagel, Equality and Partiality, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.36.

conceivably adoptable. Coercion based on such grounds would clearly be wrong, as it would be insufficiently justified. Consequently, the more stringent condition of rejectability would seem to be better suited to playing the role of a test for public justification.

Such a construction allows a wide range of pluralism, while justifying coercion. The resulting bifurcation between public and private reasons does not, however, entail the complete separation of our private and our public moral convictions. Rather, the relation between the two is complex: as citizens we are obliged to offer others reasons which they could not reasonably reject. Resulting agreements would take the form of what Rawls calls 'overlapping consensus', so called because the area of overlap is that of public reason, supported by a variety of different private reasons. The business of deliberation will necessarily require parties to examine the private reasons of others, and to have their own private reasons examined in turn, if a public justification is to be constructed for a particular proposal, which is to say, a justification which can be supported for a variety of private reasons. It is hard to see how we could argue that a proposal could be supported in this way, without actually concerning ourselves with the plurality of reasons which might count for or against it. Rawls calls principles which are found to lie at the centre of an overlapping consensus 'freestanding' not in the sense that they are unrelated to citizens' 'comprehensive' moral outlooks, but because it can be supported from a variety of different comprehensive moral outlooks.<sup>30</sup>

This view rests on the following understanding of justification, which Gerald Gaus calls 'weakly externalist'.<sup>31</sup> Weak externalism entails offering people reasons which appeal to elements of their existing system of beliefs. Thus it is not enough to construct a justification out of one's own beliefs: justification to others entails showing

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<sup>30</sup> Brian Barry voices the concern that the idea of an overlapping consensus blunts the critical force of liberal egalitarianism. Barry, 'John Rawls and the search for stability,' *Ethics* 105 (1995), pp.874-915. See below for a consideration of the problem of stability.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald Gaus, *Justificatory Liberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.32.

how the adoption of a particular course of action is justified in terms of one's interlocutor's system of beliefs as well as one's own. This can be complicated, insofar as we may find, first of all, that they share elements of our own system of belief, but have ordered these elements differently. We can imagine, for example, a situation in which two persons share a set of religious convictions, yet differ over whether they should press for the law to reflect these convictions and, secondly, that our interlocutors simply do not share certain beliefs which form part of the structure of justification we are proposing. The task of deliberation is to show that one's interlocutor has reason to reorder her beliefs, or to include new elements within her particular system.

On a 'closed' account of justification, we may proceed only by attempting justification in terms of our interlocutor's current system of belief. This excludes the possibility that we might reject a logically sound, but factually ill-founded argument which was consistent with our interlocutor's system of belief. On an 'open' account, however, we might argue that our interlocutor's existing system of belief is too narrow, and that it must be enlarged in order to include beliefs which would render her argument unsound, and pave the way to acceptance of our own justification. This account is not wholly 'external' in the sense that it parts company with the actual beliefs of those with whom we deliberate, for it can draw upon those beliefs in order to justify enlargement of a system of belief. We can do this, for example, when we appeal to beliefs about the nature of evidence, or inference, to justify acceptance of new beliefs.

Given this model of justification to others, public justification would proceed in the following ways: first we must ask ourselves whether we might reasonably expect others to share these reasons, or whether these are too narrow to have much purchase on our fellow citizens. I may favour a policy because my father always supported it or because my religion seems to require it, but I cannot expect these reasons to have much impact upon my fellow citizens, so I must formulate reasons which they cannot reasonably reject. Some might object that a problem arises here: that I am professing to hold a justification for a policy which is not my true justification and consequently I am



doing little more than manipulating others. This is not the case however, provided I believe the public reasons I have offered to be sound. A sincerity condition is clearly an element of public reason, then, and to that we may attach a publicity condition, namely, that we be required to acknowledge that we have additional, non-public, grounds for adopting a policy (even where these are not simply self-interested). Sincerity may be required in order to rule out the threat of manipulation, but publicity is important, not simply because it may foster trust and remove the suspicion of manipulation, but also because it aids the assessment of one's public reasoning. Insofar as we are situated beings, the implications of our beliefs may be supposed to be not wholly transparent to us, and consequently sincerity cannot guarantee that our efforts to reason impartially will be sound. Our non-public reasons may properly be the subject of deliberation insofar as knowledge of these may reveal unsuspected flaws in our public reasoning.

While deliberation will typically seek to uncover bases of agreement between deliberating parties, it must also cope with disagreement. Where a reinterpretation of another's beliefs does not produce assent to my proposal which replicates my own justification for it, I may consider the possibility that an alternative justification for this proposal be constructed from my interlocutor's set of beliefs. This is simply a correlate of the idea that I must formulate public reasons for my proposal, even where I am initially drawn to it for purely private reasons. In this case, I may present my interlocutor with reasons which I myself do not share, but which are drawn from his particular system of beliefs. In doing so, I must, however, sincerely believe that this justification is sound: we should not present people with 'reasons' which we believe to be spurious.<sup>32</sup>

Even this strategy may be unsuccessful, however, but this does not exhaust the obligations of deliberation, for when we encounter persistent disagreement, we need to determine whether this disagreement is to be judged reasonable, or whether it is based in ignorance, faulty reasoning, or simply self-interest. Disagreement for these reasons

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<sup>32</sup> See Gaus' discussion of such justifications in *Justificatory Liberalism*, pp. 137-51.

does not count against a proposal, and where we judge disagreement unreasonable in this way we are justified in continuing to press our proposal, and implementing it if we are successful.<sup>33</sup> The idea of public justification is not to be confused with the idea that we should seek unanimity. Where we judge disagreement reasonable, however, the situation is different: our proposal has failed the test of reasonable rejection and it would be wrong to impose it. In such situations we must seek a compromise acceptable to both parties.<sup>34</sup>

This account of the principles regulating public deliberation retains a version of the often criticised distinction between the public and private, but in interpreting it in terms of a contrast between the sort of principles which may be appealed to in public and private deliberation, it avoids the criticisms made against other versions of this distinction. Historically this distinction enters political thought with the religious pluralism of post-Reformation Europe as religious belief comes to be regarded as a private matter, lying outside the concern of political authorities.<sup>35</sup> While this remains relatively uncontroversial, Marxists and feminists have drawn attention to the way that liberalism has traditionally tended to adopt this 'strategy of avoidance' with respect to other social institutions, namely the economy and the family, with the consequence that these are placed beyond the purview of public regulation and inequalities encountered there are left unchallenged. Obviously, the public/private distinction should not operate in this way, which is to say, as a means to set *a priori* limits to public deliberation and action. Any attempt to cordon off an aspect of society must itself be justified publicly:

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<sup>33</sup> As Rawls points out, at a certain point, all that remains is for citizens to vote for that proposal they sincerely believe to be publicly justified: 'A vote can be held on a fundamental question as on any other, and if the question is debated by appeal to political values and citizens vote their sincere opinion, the ideal is sustained.' Rawls, Political Liberalism, p.241.

<sup>34</sup> See Larmore's discussion of the idea that reasonable persons 'should retreat to neutral ground' when they disagree. By this he means simply that instead of forcing the point, they should seek to construct an argument from beliefs other than those in question, or move to another aspect of the problem at hand. Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity, p.53.

<sup>35</sup> Rawls, Political Liberalism, pp.xxiv-xxvii.

issues ought not be removed from the public agenda prior to deliberation. Instead of thinking of the public/private device as a mechanism for framing the boundaries of the political in a potentially ideological way, it should rather be thought of as regulating the reasons offered in public debate in such a way that public intervention is restrained where adequate public reasons for it cannot be adduced. In a sense, the public/private distinction thus comes to be the stuff of politics, rather than as providing an 'extra-political' boundary to the conduct of politics, as citizens debate the drawing and redrawing of the line between what may be subject to public authority and what may legitimately lie outside it.

Shane O'Neill argues that Rawls' version of political liberalism operates to exclude issues from public deliberation in precisely the way criticised above. O'Neill claims that Rawls' distinction between comprehensive and political conceptions serves to exclude many controversial issues from public deliberation in the way that the traditional distinction between public and private spheres did.<sup>36</sup> In particular, he alleges that Rawls simply assumes a constitution of individual rights, which 'sets limits to political discussion' by removing issues like abortion from the political agenda.<sup>37</sup> This echoes some of Dryzek's concerns about the influence of 'liberal constitutionalism' upon deliberation, namely that it will serve to unreasonably restrict the scope of deliberation.<sup>38</sup>

Rawls certainly speaks, on occasion, as if the distinction between comprehensive and political views assumes that political views could be dealt with in isolation from the consideration of citizens' comprehensive views. He says, for example, that

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<sup>36</sup> Shane O'Neill, *Impartiality in Context*, p.14.

<sup>37</sup> O'Neill, *Impartiality in Context*, p.31,

<sup>38</sup> Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, pp.17-20.

A political conception of justice is what I call freestanding when it is not presented as derived from, or as a part of any comprehensive doctrine. Such a conception of justice in order to be a moral conception must contain its own intrinsic normative and moral ideal.<sup>39</sup>

O'Neill is also right to suppose that he underestimates the difficulties presented by a problem like abortion: he argues that a liberal Catholic could accept legal abortion without surrendering his personal opposition to it, but this does not address the problem that the contestability of the status of the foetus presents a problem for attempts to justify legal abortion to non-liberal Catholics.<sup>40</sup>

However, it is also the case that on the interpretation of overlapping consensus given above, the distinction between public and private justification does not entail the claim that political outlooks are 'isolated' from citizens' comprehensive moral views or that these could not be the subject of deliberation. Rawls himself argues that political values are not 'separate from or discontinuous with, other values.'<sup>41</sup> It would be difficult to see how an overlapping consensus could be constructed at all if citizens' comprehensive views were excluded from deliberation. The point of the distinction is not to set limits to discussion, but rather to determine the limits of what actions might be justified. In this way, while comprehensive moral views will play a central part in deliberation, they should not be regarded as providing a sufficient justification for the exercise of public authority. In fact, Rawls does, as Gutmann and Thompson point out, restrict the scope of deliberation, but not in the way that O'Neill suggests.<sup>42</sup>

He does this by restricting deliberation to 'constitutional essentials', while seemingly leaving the stuff of ordinary politics open to traditional interest-group

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<sup>39</sup> Rawls, Political Liberalism, p.xliv.

<sup>40</sup> Rawls, Political Liberalism, pp. lv-lviii.

<sup>41</sup> Rawls, Political Liberalism, p.10.

<sup>42</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp.33-9.

competition.<sup>43</sup> This certainly answers O'Neill's objection, as the liberal constitution cannot be both an extra-political boundary serving to withdraw issues from public concern, *and* the subject of public deliberation at the same time. However, it does seem to be an unjustified restriction upon deliberation. If political equality requires deliberation, this seems to require it across the board: we should not be deaf to the just claims of others in the daily conduct of politics. Neither might it be justified on the grounds that deliberation is too demanding for ordinary politics, that it is easier to secure agreement on the relatively 'thin' principles contained in a constitution, for the opposite appears to be the case. A brief glance at the constitutional upheavals which characterised Irish politics in the 1980s and early 1990s over the issue of abortion should serve to dispel the idea that constitutional questions are less divisive than other political questions.<sup>44</sup> As interpreted here, the idea of distinguishing public and private justification, and the idea that a publicly justified policy is one which may be supported for a variety of reasons, is not a device for restricting the scope of public deliberation.

There is another sort of objection commonly made against political constructivism, namely that the contractarian form of the procedure relies too heavily upon the idea of agreement, and is consequently ill-disposed to recognise dissensus and, by implication, reasonable pluralism. This reproduces the complaint of contextualists against 'universalism': that it is insensitive to genuine plurality. Nicholas Rescher objects that the idea of reasonable agreement is hostile to pluralism and simply assumes that reasonable people will agree, when in fact reasonable people may equally fail to arrive at a consensus, for reasons of both conceptual and value pluralism.<sup>45</sup> He goes on to argue that agreement does not, in any case, play a significant role in theories where it is qualified by the condition of reasonableness. In these theories it is

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<sup>43</sup> 'The first point is that the limits imposed by public reason do not apply to all political questions but only to those involving what we may call 'constitutional essentials' and questions of basic justice.' Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p.214.

<sup>44</sup> See Lisa Smyth, 'Narratives of Irishness and the problem of abortion,' *Feminist Review* 60 (1998), pp.61-83.

<sup>45</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

the idea of reasonableness itself which is really doing the work, insofar as agreement on its own is not regarded as a sufficient guarantee of the legitimacy of the principles agreed upon. We should, on this view, concentrate on spelling out what counts as 'reasonable' and simply discard the idea of agreement, with its implication that reason provides universally accepted foundations.

Rescher is right to say that it is the idea of the reasonable which does the real work: this idea clearly contains substantive commitments to equality and, derived from that, impartiality, which serve to rule out agreements produced through coercion or manipulation. However, the idea of the contract is not wholly redundant insofar as it plays a role in the interpretation of the idea of reasonableness itself. This role is to bring out the idea that equality involves justification to others. The significance of the contractarian device lies in the fact that it is part of the interpretation of equality, and not that it constitutes a demand, redundant or otherwise, for consensus. Understood in this way the ideas of the reasonable and of justification to others may be disconnected from the idea of consensus to the extent that reasonable people may be understood to disagree.

Understood in this way, it is clear that the contractarian form of constructivist morality does not operate to blunt the demands of justice by means of a predisposition to consensus. Having said that, Rawls' idea of the possibility of an overlapping consensus is connected to the idea of stability in ways which give cause for concern. Rawls claims that 'the problem of stability is fundamental to political philosophy' and states the problem driving his conception of political liberalism in the following way: 'How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?'<sup>46</sup> Introducing the question of stability in this way prompts the concern that overlapping consensus may amount to little more than a 'modus vivendi', which is to say, a bargain struck between competing groups,

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<sup>46</sup> Rawls, Political Liberalism, p.xx.

whenever the costs of continued conflict appear too great. Peace and stability can in this way come to displace the demands of justice, as the risk is that the terms of such agreements will simply reflect the balance of forces between competing parties. The Unionist government in Northern Ireland established after partition provides an example of the sort of problem posed by the introduction of stability in this way: this government was stable although the society it ruled over was marked by significant economic and political discrimination against the nationalist minority.

As noted in the discussion of impartiality in Chapter Four, the problem of reconciling the demands of justice with other demands such as the desire to live well, or in this case, to live in a stable political order, is a deep and difficult one, and not one that I can hope to resolve here. The danger is that the demands of justice will be repelled by appealing to 'realism', if by interpreting 'realism' in such a way is to accord it the status of an independent value. The point of view of justice resists the idea that we adapt our principles to fit political realities: ought implies can and the relationship between the world and our principles is such that the world should be brought into line with just principles, not the other way around.<sup>47</sup> Peace is a great value, but we should not allow the determination of the unjust to resist the claims of justice by appealing to it. However the potential for conflict between the two is to be resolved, it is clear that stability is a consideration in competition with the requirements of constructivist morality, and not an essential element of it.

In any event, the demands of political stability are in tension with Rawls' own requirement that an overlapping consensus be a consensus for the 'right reasons' and not a mere 'modus vivendi', a mere accommodation between opposing parties.<sup>48</sup> This

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<sup>47</sup> See Nagel, Equality and Partiality, and David Copp's discussion of Rawls in particular, 'Pluralism and stability in liberal theory,' Journal of Political Philosophy 4 (1996), pp.191-206.

<sup>48</sup> This model of liberal politics as founded on an accommodation between hitherto warring parties, a 'modus vivendi' is set out in Charles Larmore's Patterns of Moral Complexity. Rawls addresses the difference between this and his idea of an overlapping consensus in the light of Joshua Cohen's discussion of the difference between the two in 'Moral Pluralism and political consensus,' in The Idea of Democracy, David Copp, Jean Hampton, and John Roemer (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.270-91. Rawls contrasts the two in the following terms: 'The point is that not all reasonable doctrines are liberal comprehensive doctrines; so the question is whether they can

would exclude compromises based on threats and manipulation. Nonetheless, in considering whether justice as fairness could be deemed acceptable from the point of view of stability, Rawls suggests that in the event that such principles should appear to be inconsistent with stability, 'We should have to see whether acceptable changes in the principles of justice would achieve stability; or indeed whether stability could obtain for any democratic conception.'<sup>49</sup> Here the emphasis must presumably fall upon the idea of 'acceptable' changes, if Rawls is to avoid allowing stability to outweigh the demands of justice.

The contractarian form of the construction of the principles which regulate public deliberation does not unduly weight the deliberative process towards consensus. We might well hope that consensus be the outcome of political deliberations, but the role of contractarian morality is to guide the deliberations of individual citizens not to enjoin compromise. This guidance includes the provision of a standard against which to judge an existing 'consensus' and where this is judged unjust, contractarianism justifies opposition, not acquiescence.

### *Impartial Deliberation and Context*

Can this model of impartial public deliberation respond to contextualist points about the significance of situated differences pertaining between the citizens of liberal democracies, and can contextual redescription and interpretation play a significant role in such deliberation? Both questions may be answered in the affirmative. However, there are two sorts of objection to this account. First of all, some theorists, such as Anne Phillips, are concerned that the idea of deliberative politics is itself at least

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still be compatible for the right reasons with a liberal political conception. To do this, I contend, it is not sufficient that these doctrines accept a democratic regime merely as a *modus vivendi*. Rather they must accept it as members of a reasonable overlapping consensus.' Rawls, Political Liberalism, p.xxxix.

<sup>49</sup> Rawls, Political Liberalism, p.66.



potentially injurious to the demands of marginalised groups. This worry may be addressed by distinguishing impartial deliberation from mere reciprocity based deliberation. The second objection to this account of deliberation is that impartiality itself is incompatible with the recognition of situated differences, which is to say, differences of identity and perspective. This claim, made by Iris Young, rests on a misunderstanding of impartiality. In fact, it will be argued, impartiality demands that we attend to differences of perspective in order that we might construct public justifications, as this requires engagement with the beliefs of differently situated others. This engagement, by which is meant the understanding and assessment of these beliefs, is aided by the sort of contextual interpretation and redescription which can enrich individual moral deliberation. Far from opposing contextual considerations, an impartial conception of deliberation makes them central to the conduct of deliberative politics, for without understanding and reinterpretation, acceptable public justification will not be possible.

Anne Phillips is herself drawn towards deliberation because of the requirement to include hitherto excluded perspectives in the political process. While it is true that political equality depends in large measure on equality in resources, it is also the case that a more inclusive, deliberative style of politics can help to secure equality in other spheres, as marginal groups will be able to press their claims more forcefully if they can participate in political decision-making, instead of being simply the objects of those decisions. She is concerned, however, that the second element of deliberation, namely, the emphasis on the transformation of pre-deliberative perspectives through the deliberative process, may well work to the disadvantage of marginal groups. This risk is increased by the antipathy of deliberative democrats to interest-group politics. On one hand, they are wary of measures which smack of group representation for this appears to serve the construction of new versions of old-fashioned interest-group politics, versions which are more inclusive but which are equally hostile to deliberation

and transformation.<sup>50</sup> Phillips goes on to argue that there is a danger that the 'requirement for equitable representation' be regarded as 'dependent on whether it manages to promote 'good' deliberation'.<sup>51</sup> Connected with this is the fear that deliberation is hostile to the language of interest *per se* and that this will make it harder for disadvantaged groups to articulate and to press their interests in public deliberation, thus confirming their subordinate position in society.<sup>52</sup> The deliberative focus on reaching consensus over simple competition may then serve to produce agreements which simply embody adaptive preferences.<sup>53</sup>

These criticisms are more appropriate to the first two models of deliberative democracy outlined above: the Aristotelian and the epistemic. The Aristotelian model clearly enjoins that participants set aside their private interests and pursue the common good. Benjamin Barber, for example criticises the 'liberal' citizen, who has multiple identities and finds himself pulled in different directions by them. Instead of regarding this as normal, however, Barber argues that his 'strong' democratic citizenship can resolve these tensions by demanding that citizens set aside their particular interests and the identities they spring from and devote themselves to the public interest.<sup>54</sup> Equally, the tension between inclusion and 'good' deliberation is evident in Fishkin's account of deliberation in which it is assumed that elitism best serves to produce the best deliberation. The egalitarian conception of deliberation is not subject to these

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<sup>50</sup> The argument of Chapter Three was that standpoint theory justifies inclusion in terms which are incompatible with deliberation. A hermeneutic understanding of situation, however, provides the basis for arguments for inclusion which avoid the pitfalls of standpoint theory.

<sup>51</sup> Phillips, Which Equalities Matter? (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), p.118.

<sup>52</sup> Phillips, Which Equalities Matter? p.121.

<sup>53</sup> Phillips, The Politics of Presence, p.162.

<sup>54</sup> Barber believes that the phenomenon of multiple identifications promotes 'a pervasive sense of confusion and political apathy that is corrosive to citizenship and to democracy'. In 'strong democracy', by contrast, 'the citizen emerges from the struggle of partisan interest as a whole person...He finds himself measuring his private interests by the yardstick of public interests in which, as a citizen, he has a growing investment. Citizenship here serves to transform interests and to reorient identity; the dilemmas of pluralist society are thereby addressed they are challenged head on.' Evidently, pluralism is not so much challenged, as denied on this model, giving the lie to Barber's claim that he is not a simple communitarian. Barber, Strong Democracy, p.208-9.

criticisms, however, for it not only justifies inclusion, but the sort of transformation in perspective which it enjoins does not simply exclude interests, or subordinate them to the common good.

This understanding of deliberation conceives of it as regulated by impartiality; the transformation required is one which distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate interests, considered impartially. On this view, impartial consideration of the interests articulated in deliberation requires parties to abandon claims which are deemed illegitimate, and support those judged legitimate, whether these serve the interests of one's own group or not. Deliberative democracy may be contrasted with interest-group competition not because it is hostile to the articulation of group interests, but because the unfettered pursuit of these interests is regarded as incompatible with equality, which requires us to be open to the legitimate claims of others. Phillips, presumably, fears that *legitimate* interests will be sidelined in deliberation, not that illegitimate interests will be excluded from debate. This fear is well founded in the case of Aristotelian and epistemic models of deliberation, but not with respect to the egalitarian conception of deliberation, which aims to promote the articulation of *legitimate* interests, and to enjoin such transformation of perspectives as will promote support for those interests.

Deliberation requires us to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate interests, and it is distinguished from majoritarianism by the idea that equality requires us to be impartial, to set aside our interests where they cannot be judged legitimate. Majoritarianism is wrong to the extent that it sanctions the implementation of policies which are unacceptable, judged impartially. Some deliberative democrats, however, believe that requiring deliberation to be governed by impartiality is too stringent a requirement, and consequently we should reject it in favour of reciprocity. Gutmann and Thompson claim that impartiality, understood as a requirement to act for the general good, is too rigorous a norm for regulating public deliberation.<sup>55</sup> They go on to

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<sup>55</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement, p.54.

argue that altruism is not only excessively rigorous but that it is not equipped to deal with problems of contestability, such as those presented by disputes about legal abortion. In such cases, they argue, altruists will simply be unable to identify the general good which they should support and consequently, altruism has no special power to produce consensus. For this reason it should give way to reciprocity, to the desire to cooperate with others conditional on reciprocation of this willingness to cooperate. Furthermore, they claim, the desire to cooperate justifies the pursuit of compromise whenever insoluble conflicts are identified.

Why should we favour the more demanding ideal of impartiality? Gutmann and Thompson are right to suggest that impartiality cannot resolve all conflicts, but they provide no argument to the effect that reciprocity *can* resolve these conflicts, nor that persons motivated by impartiality cannot then seek an accommodation. Impartiality demands that we must refrain from imposing views we understand to be partial and to this extent it provides a basis for seeking an accommodation. Gutmann and Thompson fail to show that reciprocity is superior to impartiality with respect to conflict resolution. Furthermore, they do not consider the danger of weakening the normative requirements governing deliberation which are entailed by the substitution of reciprocity for impartiality.

The difference lies in the way that, as Brian Barry argues, a concern for impartiality brings the background conditions of deliberation into consideration.<sup>56</sup> Reciprocity, he argues, differs from the theory of justice as mutual advantage only insofar as it introduces a moral motive: the desire to cooperate, where this is reciprocated. Otherwise, it is insensitive to the potential for unfairness present in agreements struck between unequal parties. Provided both parties are willing to compromise, the terms of the compromise itself are not considered. These terms may simply reflect the existing imbalance of power between the parties concerned. By subjecting public deliberation to the requirement of impartiality, however, impartial

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<sup>56</sup> Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p.59.

deliberation is sensitive to such imbalances in a way that reciprocity is not. Whereas a group may support a refusal to compromise on legitimate demands with reference to impartiality, the danger of adopting the requirement of reciprocity is that such refusal to compromise must itself be deemed illegitimate and consequently, as Anne Phillips fears, the disadvantaged will be prevented from pressing legitimate interests.

To take a practical example, The current negotiations over the reform of the RUC serve to bring out the contrast between the two. Nationalists have an interest in refusing to compromise on the issue of the implementation of the recommendations of the Patten report, while Unionists have an interest in resisting the full implementation of the report.<sup>57</sup> On the understanding that implementation of the Patten recommendations will result in the creation of an impartial police service in the North of Ireland, while the failure to implement these proposals will frustrate this aim, it is clear that impartial consideration of this conflict falls on the side of the implementation of Patten's recommendations, and justifies the Nationalist refusal to compromise on this demand. Reciprocity, by contrast enjoins compromise on this question, which can only result in the failure to establish an impartial police force. On this view unionists are free to exploit their superior bargaining position, which is to say, their deliberately created political majority within Northern Ireland, in order to achieve a compromise. From the point of view of impartiality, reciprocity would enjoin a compromise that was itself unfair: it skews deliberation towards compromise, and ignores the imbalances of power which serve to determine the nature of the compromises thus sanctioned. By conceiving of the conduct of deliberation in terms of impartiality rather than merely in terms of reciprocity, we may distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable compromises, and we can justify the refusal of parties to compromise where legitimate

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<sup>57</sup> A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland: The Report of the Independent Commission for Policing in Northern Ireland, (1999). Recommendations include: renaming the RUC; the symbols of the new police service should be free from associations with British or Irish states; policing boards representative of the community as a whole be established; these should have the power to review the activities of the police; recruitment policy should seek to be inclusive with respect to political tradition, religion, and gender.

interests are at stake. Conceiving of deliberation in these terms preserves its radical potential.

Impartiality has itself been criticised by Iris Young, as providing an inadequate basis for an inclusive, deliberative, politics. She repeats communitarian arguments to the effect that impartiality is impossible, to the extent that it requires us to 'abstract from the particularities of situation, feeling, affiliation, and point of view.'<sup>58</sup> She introduces a new element into this critique of impartiality, however, insofar as she argues that it is incompatible with deliberative politics because the impartial point of view is unable to recognise pluralism. Consequently, appeals to impartiality can only serve the interests of dominant groups, who employ impartiality as an ideology to justify the continued exclusion of marginal groups from the political process.

As Young sees it, adopting an impartial point of view effectively reduces 'the plurality of all moral subjects to one subjectivity.'<sup>59</sup> Insofar as it substitutes the judgement of a single person for the public deliberation, it renders actual deliberation redundant:

The decision arrived at by the impartial decisionmaker is one all those affected would have arrived at if they had discussed it under circumstances of mutual respect and equal power. So provided we find impartial decisionmakers we have no need for discussion.<sup>60</sup>

Consequently, a commitment to impartiality will tend towards an undemocratic style of government. In institutional terms this gives rise to a predilection for government by an

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<sup>58</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p.97.

<sup>59</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p.100.

<sup>60</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p.112.

elite of impartial bureaucrats, and 'impartiality' functions then as an ideology legitimating their rule.

Young goes on to argue that because of this opposition between discussion and impartiality, the public sphere, such as it is, will be shaped by elites which will define as normal and impartially vindicated, their own particular views. Typically these have been the views of white, upper class men and this has worked to the detriment of other groups who find that their concerns are excluded from consideration in the public sphere as merely 'particularist'.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, far from opposing public deliberation, impartiality requires the articulation of the full range of perspectives present in society and engagement with them as a condition of constructing public justifications. The first point which can be made in response to Young's criticisms is that her argument itself rests on the assumption that public decision making should be impartial: how else are we to make sense of her opposition to the partiality of elites? She is right to point to the way that claims to impartiality can be made as part of a strategy to sideline one's opponents by representing them as partial, and self-interested, rather than as committed to the public interest, but any concept is open to this sort of abuse. Political elites typically represent themselves as honest, truthful, morally justified, etc. but the fact that they do so to further their own interests does not invalidate these ideas themselves. Young fails to admit the distinction between impartiality and the appearance of impartiality. Her argument, like that of Marxists against the partiality of the bourgeois state, rests upon the value which she purports to criticise.

This places Young's argument about the supposed connection between impartiality and elitism into perspective. Elite rule can still be criticised from an impartial point of view even where these elites seek to represent themselves as

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<sup>61</sup> 'The standpoint of the privileged, their particular experience and standards, is constructed as normal and neutral. If oppressed groups challenge the alleged neutrality of prevailing assumptions and policies, and express their own experience and perspectives, their claims are heard as those of biased, selfish special interests that deviate from the impartial general interest.' Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p.116.

impartial, and we can appeal to impartiality in order to justify measures to make government more accountable. It does not follow from the idea that we should like our bureaucracies to be impartial that we should be happy to trust in the assurances of those who direct them that they actually are impartial. On the contrary, if we want impartiality rather than its appearance we would choose to open the activities of those in these institutions to scrutiny in order to test their commitment to impartiality. For example, an essential element of the Patten report on the reform of the RUC are the provisions for undertaking independent inquiries into the activities of the police: impartiality justifies accountability.

Finally, there is Young's claim that the impartial point of view is essentially inimical to pluralism. This can be taken in two ways: first of all as a point about the construction of impartial judgements, and secondly as a point about the place of individual moral deliberation *vis à vis* public deliberation. On the first point the claim is that impartiality requires us to ignore the particularities which differentiate people and to this extent it is effectively 'monological' rather than 'dialogical', in the sense that the only perspective which remains once differences have been eliminated in this way is that of the individual moral reasoner.<sup>62</sup>

The best example of this is provided by Rawls' account of moral reasoning in which the individual moral agent is supposed to adopt the device of the original position in order to help determine his choice of principles of justice.<sup>63</sup> This choice is then tested against his moral intuitions in the hope that a 'reflective equilibrium' may be achieved between principles and intuitions. The construction of the original position, which is to guide the choice of principles has two unusual features: the assumption that

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<sup>62</sup> See also Shane O'Neill for this criticism of Rawls in *Impartiality in Context*. While Rawls' construction of the 'original position' in *A Theory of Justice* is flawed, O'Neill, like Young, uncritically accepts the claim that Habermas' 'ideal speech situation' is significantly different from the basically contractualist position adopted by Rawls. It is claimed that Habermas' position is 'dialogical' in a way that ordinary contractualism is not. However, as Christopher McMahon argues, the difference between the two positions is negligible unless one takes Habermas to be arguing for an implausibly consensualist account of morality, i.e. one that makes unanimity a condition of right judgement. See McMahon, 'Discourse and ethics,' *Ethics* 110 (2000), pp.514-36.

<sup>63</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp.48-51.



those choosing principles do so on the basis of self-interest and, secondly, that they choose from behind a 'veil of ignorance', which is to say, without knowledge of their particular situation in the society that would result from the choice of the principles in question. In this way, it is hoped, the choice of principles will be impartial.

This account of the role of impartiality in the construction of principles adds weight to Young's charge that the demands of impartiality are in direct conflict with the recognition of our situatedness and the resulting plurality of identities and perspectives. While Rawls presents the contractual device which informs the original position as representing plurality, it is hard to see how this can be so, given that the hypothetical choosers in the original position lack all the particularising features which would give content to this plurality, for example, age, gender, ethnicity, class, etc. We cannot imagine real debate taking place in the original position because it lacks the plurality of perspectives present in real politics. It is as if Rawls' hypothetical chooser were to argue with himself, in the same way as he might play chess against himself.

However, the case for impartiality does not stand or fall with Rawls' notions of the original position and the veil of ignorance. Rawls' construction, after all, is regarded as flawed by other impartialists. Its weakness stems from the way that the parties in the original position are assumed to choose on the basis of self-interest. This is what requires the implausible device of the veil of ignorance in order to 'baffle' the self-interest of the parties and to ensure that they will choose impartially.<sup>64</sup> As Barry argues, it is simpler to dispense with the whole device of the original position, and to make a more direct argument for the principles which Rawls' supposes will be chosen in the original position.<sup>65</sup> The original position and the veil of ignorance are simply an unhelpful complication. A better account of the impartial standpoint is that provided by

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<sup>64</sup> Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, p.101.

<sup>65</sup> Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, pp.57-61.

Thomas Nagel, in that it does not rely upon the sort of implausible idealisation which characterises the original position.<sup>66</sup>

This has the virtue that it makes it clear that adopting an impartial point of view does not entail ignorance of the particularities which are essential to plurality. As Nagel conceives it, the impartial point of view is a form of objective standpoint, a standpoint which includes one's subjective perspective within it. To adopt an impartial view is simply to describe oneself in the third person, as simply one person among others in order to bracket out the 'mineness' which may otherwise bias our assessment of competing beliefs and interests. Described in this way, our projects must be judged as if they were the projects of any other person in the world. Unlike Rawls' construction Nagel's account of impersonal morality does not exclude particularity and the separateness of persons from consideration.

This more economical account of impartiality answers Young's charge that the construction of impartial principles relies on the exclusion of plurality, for as Nagel presents it, impartiality relies on recognition of this plurality. By this I mean that impartiality is a rule for guiding our treatment of others, in the sense that it first of all recognises the existence of alternative perspectives and interests, and secondly requires us to judge which of these must be affirmed, regardless of which happens to be our own. There can be no question of being partial or impartial with respect to our own interests where we do not recognise the existence of others with alternative interests. The existence of others with distinct needs, interests, and perspectives is the logical precondition of the impartial standpoint, while egalitarianism is its moral basis. Impartiality is simply the egalitarian response to the recognition of reasonable pluralism. Nagel's account of the impartial standpoint, in contrast to that set out in Rawls' original position, does not exclude particularising information about myself or others, but rather seeks to bracket out partiality, not particularity, by adopting a third personal description of myself, presenting my own interests and beliefs alongside those

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<sup>66</sup> Nagel, The View from Nowhere.

of the others I must judge. Instead of presenting others in a way which makes them impossible to distinguish from myself, we might say that this version of the impartial standpoint works in the opposite way: it seeks to present my claims to myself in the same way that I present those of others to myself.

Understood in this way, impartiality need not entail the *substitution* of individual deliberation for actual public deliberation, for without actually engaging with the perspectives of others there is no prospect of arriving at an impartial judgement with respect to them. Neither does it replace individual judgement with public deliberation in the sense that individuals are required to defer to any consensus achieved through deliberation. The extension of individual deliberation into the public sphere imposes special obligations: where public authority is to be exercised, our justifications must meet the test of reasonable rejection. At the end of the day, it is for individuals to judge whether their proposals meet this test, or whether objections are reasonable or not. The main difference between individual and public deliberation is that, in the former, justifications must be constructed from one's own system of beliefs, while in the case of the latter, justification must be constructed from a plurality of systems of belief. Just as I cannot construct sound justifications for my own actions where I do not fully understand the content of my interests and beliefs, so too I cannot hope to successfully justify my proposals for collective action to others where I do not understand their interests and beliefs.

The fact of situation, the fact of the existence of a plurality of interpretable identities and perspectives, is a condition of impartial deliberation, which is to say that it forms the circumstances of such deliberation. On a foundationalist view of reason, public deliberation would be relatively straightforward, as all reasonable persons could be shown to agree upon basic principles, and in principle, upon a uniform system of belief from which justifications could then be constructed. A foundationalist understanding of reason would be unable to appreciate the need for a distinction between public and private reasoning, as there is no essential difference between the two: they proceed from the same uniform system of belief. However, what a

hermeneutic understanding of reason, one which rests on conceptual pluralism and sees this as embodied in various belief forming traditions, insists upon is the fact that public deliberation has no such foundation and the construction of public justifications will have to deal with a plurality of reasonable systems of belief. We all start from different situations, and bring distinct perspectives to public deliberation.

Impartiality, on this understanding, is not inimical to the plurality of situations and perspectives, but, on the contrary, requires the articulation of these differences as an essential element of the construction of public justifications. The hermeneutic understanding of situation enriches our understanding of what impartiality requires in two ways: firstly, it serves to explain plurality with reference to the ideas of thrownness and tradition and secondly in affirming an anti-foundational, conceptual pluralism it presents this plurality of perspectives as a permanent feature of theoretical and practical reason. However, this understanding of situation does not, it has been argued, exclude a commitment to impartiality, which is the egalitarian response to such pluralism. This requires us not only to recognise that others have distinct needs and interests, but also that they may interpret these in ways which may not be initially obvious to us. Where impartiality requires us to justify our policy proposals to others we are therefore required to engage with their actual interpretations of themselves and their interests. Appreciation of the way in which context shapes our identities and beliefs thus becomes central to the conduct of impartial deliberation as this is essential to the interpretation of these perspectives.

Contextualisation, which is to say, socio-historical interpretation concerned with identifying beliefs in terms of their place in a narrative of the development and transformation of a discourse, or tradition, must therefore play a central role in the construction of public justifications. We need to identify what others actually believe, and also to understand what part a belief plays in the configuration of their particular system of beliefs if we are to construct justifications from these systems. Contextualisation is not limited to achieving understanding, of course, but also serves, as was indicated above, to transform beliefs through redescribing and reinterpreting

both the objects of moral judgement and the terms in which these judgements are made.

It has been argued in this Chapter that socio-historical contextualisation can be combined with moral deliberation to form an interpretive social criticism. Socio-historical redescription of our situations can lead to revisions of our beliefs and judgements by addressing itself not only to the circumstances to which we apply our principles, but also by revealing hitherto unnoticed complexities in our conceptual resources. Having shown how critical morality and socio-historical redescription can be combined, the next problem was to address the ethical concerns of contextualists, with recognition and with transformation. It was argued that these concerns could be best accommodated within the framework of a deliberative conception of politics, premised on the idea of impartial public justification. While many have criticised impartialist politics for its inability to cope with contextual considerations, it was argued here that, on the contrary, such a politics will, if it is to be successful, have an interpretive social criticism at its centre.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to consider the role of contextualisation in the conduct of social criticism and the conflict between the normative claims of contextualists and those of impartialist liberals. It was argued that contextualisation can serve as part of a project of social criticism and that the resulting interpretive social criticism is not only compatible with liberal egalitarian politics, but also that a commitment to impartial public deliberation requires us to engage in the practice of such criticism.

The task has been to determine the place of context within the framework of liberal egalitarian politics when, on one hand, contextualists present appeals to situation and to interpretation as key elements in a critique of liberal politics, and of impartial morality in particular, and on the other hand, liberals are unwilling to attach any significance to such phenomena, remaining, at best, indifferent, and, at worst, openly hostile to the claims made on behalf of context. The aim of this thesis has been to do justice to the sociological realism of contextualism without compromising critical, impartial morality. If context is not allowed to count against impartiality, however, what role can it possibly play? If we attach no moral weight to it, in the form of special obligations to those amongst whom one is situated, for example, then how can it be relevant to our moral and political deliberations? If we deny that we can easily derive moral judgements from ontological claims, then have we not rendered contextual considerations irrelevant?

It has been argued here that contextual considerations must actually play a central role in our deliberations, albeit not in the way that contextualists suppose. It is argued that liberal egalitarian politics must be deliberative, which is to say that if we are to treat others as equals, in conditions of pluralism, we must engage in impartial deliberation with them concerning the employment of public authority. It is here that context comes to play a role in liberal egalitarian politics in the form of an interpretive social criticism, premised on the fact of situation. Deliberative politics requires participants to be open to the possibility that they have misinterpreted both their own interests and those of others and it is hoped that, through the process of deliberation, participants may come to reinterpret themselves and their

relations to others, forming better judgements as a result. It is argued here that an interpretive social criticism is not simply an aid to deliberation, but, given the fact of situation and a commitment to impartiality, it is positively required by it. In this way, contextualisation comes to play a central role in liberal egalitarian politics, not compromising the commitment to impartiality, but, on the contrary, following from it.

In setting out this account of contextualisation, two aspects of context have been distinguished: firstly the idea of contextualisation, or interpretation, and secondly, the idea of situations, namely, the fact that one is situated in a context. In order to arrive at a model of contextual social criticism which may form part of a deliberative conception of politics we need a proper understanding of both contextualisation and of situation. It has been argued here that an adequate understanding of interpretation must rely on conceptual pluralism, which is to say, that it must deny that metaphysical primacy can be accorded to any particular range of description or standpoint. The resulting model of interpretation makes use both of generalising and particularising descriptions and permits interpreters to adopt both the objective standpoint of socio-historical description and that of impartial morality, as required. This model of interpretation can then play a part in social criticism to the extent that it can be employed to redescribe situations and can combine redescription with moral deliberation. These two, on this account, need not be regarded as mutually exclusive.

With respect to situation, a basically hermeneutic understanding of context was set out, comprising of the idea of conceptual pluralism, a public account of meaning, and the traditionalisation of interpretive schemes and problematics. This understanding of situation explains pluralism at the societal level without succumbing to claims to the effect that certain situations and perspectives are in some way 'privileged'. This hermeneutic understanding of situation is significant in that it presents situated persons as opaque, both to themselves and to others. This opacity, which is derived from the fact that we come to understand ourselves through public, historical, languages, is a premise not only of social criticism, but also of deliberative politics. This opacity is not to be regarded solely as a limit, as part of our finite nature, for it also represents an opportunity. Only where one is opaque in this way can one

reinterpret and revise one's self-understanding. The possibility of revision rests on the right sort of understanding of what it means to be situated in a context.

The contextualisms reviewed here rely, however, not only upon certain ideas about the limits of interpretation and the nature and implications of situation, but also upon two distinct sorts of ethical concern. On one hand, contextualists frequently appeal to the phenomenon of context in order to draw attention to hitherto unacknowledged sorts of pluralism and in order to demand recognition of these. On the other hand, radical contextualists, while also pointing to the plurality of perspectives attending the fact of situation in different social contexts, have argued that we must reinterpret in order to transform, rather than in order to evince respect for, the perspectives present in a given society. It has been argued here that both concerns are legitimate and that social criticism must aim at both the transformation of beliefs and identities and at achieving recognition for these. It is also argued, however, that this can only be achieved where social criticism forms part of an impartial, deliberative, politics, for otherwise it will be unable to distinguish between those identities and perspectives in need of transformation and those worthy of recognition.

The first step in this argument was to set out an account of interpretation which would permit the sort of redescription on which any social criticism must rest. The sophisticated version of the history of political thought advanced by Quentin Skinner was seen to avoid the reductionism of treating context as a cause, and ideas as an effect, or reflection of their context, by making context *internal* to texts. By this I mean that attention to context becomes part of the business of identifying the arguments contained in the texts concerned. However, it was argued that Skinner's claim that a truly historical contextualisation would restrict itself to the identification of authorial intention and avoid descriptions not intended by historical authors, is unduly restrictive. If Skinner were right, then redescription is never legitimate and socio-historical contextualisation can never play a role in normative deliberation or social criticism.

Clearly, an account of context and interpretation which permitted redescription was necessary. It was argued, in Chapter One, that Skinner was relying on an implausibly



intentionalist reading of speech-act theory in order to rule out redescription. By contrast, an appropriately public account of language and meaning allows for the possibility of texts carrying a surplus of meaning, and therefore, for the possibility of redescription or reinterpretation. An account of interpretation was then set out which centred on the ideas that the sort of *a priori* restriction on redescription advanced by Skinner was misconceived. If we were to accept the model of contextualisation advanced by Skinner, then we should have to deny socio-historical contextualisation a role in the conduct of social criticism. Furthermore, Skinner's claim that redescription is illegitimate and the account of meaning on which it rests, would rule out the possibility of revising one's self understanding, presenting an insurmountable difficulty not only to the project of social criticism, but also to that of a deliberative politics.

Relying on an anti-foundationalist conceptual pluralism it was argued in Chapter Two that there was no way to demonstrate that any particular characterisation of an object could be deemed either comprehensive or final, but rather, given that no conceptual scheme is, in metaphysical terms, more fundamental than any other, there are a limitless range of interpretive possibilities open to interpreters. The second feature of this account of interpretation is its pragmatism. No interpretation can be final, or comprehensive, but some are nonetheless, better than others in the sense that they are not only more accurate, and more or less systematic, but also insofar as they better serve to answer the questions posed by the interpreter. It was argued that it is the questions of the interpreter which determine the value of a particular characterisation or level of description: given the immense variety of true statements which can be made about objects of inquiry, the value of a particular characterisation cannot be determined without reference to the interpretive problem at hand.

What this means for understandings of context, is that we must give up the idea that there is such a thing as 'context' which is independent of contextualisation, that is to say, interpretation. There is no set of relations between an idea, or text and its author, circumstances of origin, other texts, subsequent history etc., which can claim to be the authentic context which finally unlocks the meaning of that idea. This makes the question of context one of determining what sort of interpretation, what level, or levels of descriptions,

best suits our aims. If we wish to examine what authors originally meant by what they said, then we may well proceed as Skinner suggests. If we want to trace discontinuities in bodies of thought, then perhaps we ought to follow Foucault's precepts instead. In particular, it is argued here that the sort of contextualisation which will be of most use to social criticism is one which allows for the possibility of redescription. This dictates focusing social criticism at the level of traditions, ideologies or discourses, insofar as these schemes focus on the idea that individuals' pronouncements may be instances of larger wholes without this necessarily being transparent to the individuals concerned. It is stressed that this account of pragmatic contextualisation privileges neither particularising nor generalising descriptions: both forms of abstraction have a place in the work of redescription. Neither does it accord a privileged status to a descriptive-explanatory standpoint over a moral/practical standpoint: both are equally viable perspectives to adopt on this account and social criticism must make use of both.

Having set out an account of context and interpretation which may serve the aims of social criticism, the argument then turns to the normative claims tied up with various understandings of context and situation and different models of social criticism. Two models of what it means to be situated in a context were identified: the epistemic and the hermeneutic. Likewise, two models of social criticism were identified: a particularist, communitarian social criticism, and a radical, transformative social criticism. In all of this, two sorts of ethical concern were seen to be at work: one with the recognition of distinct identities and one with the transformation of oppressive identities.

It was argued, in Chapter Three, that the epistemic conception of situation was deficient in that it rested upon a private conception of meaning and was unable to explain why communication was possible amongst persons sharing a particular situation, but not between persons differently situated. It relied on this account of meaning to make implausible claims about self-transparency and the authority of self-interpretation. If we were to accept an epistemic understanding of situation, then we should have to deny that social criticism and deliberative politics were possible, for these rely on the absence of self-transparency and on the possibility of communication with differently situated others. The resulting solipsism

would undermine not only liberal egalitarian politics, but also radical social criticism insofar as transformation through reinterpretation is ruled out by this understanding of situation.

By contrast, the hermeneutic understanding of situation, set out in Chapter Four, was seen to rely both on a conceptual pluralism, and on a public, language-based account of meaning. Treating languages as expressing conceptual pluralism on one hand and making this concrete, by emphasising the historical, institutional character of languages and problematics, the hermeneutic account of situation can explain pluralism at the level of social groups but also the possibility of communication between differently situated persons. The hermeneutic view also places the practice of interpretation in context by showing how the problems of interpreters can themselves be institutionalised, thus completing the account of pragmatic contextualisation set out in Chapter Two. On account of the hermeneutic premise of self-opacity and reinterpretability it also provides an account of situation which is compatible with the redescriptive aims of social criticism.

It was argued, however, that the version of social criticism derived from the hermeneutic understanding of situation was unnecessarily reductive insofar as it excluded the possibility of adopting an impartial standpoint and with it a critical morality. This view, it was shown, rested on an insufficiently pluralist conception of context and interpretation and was rejected: there is no need to adopt a parochial attitude to morality because one accepts a hermeneutic ontology.

Chapter Five then turned to the radical transformative social criticism of Marx and Foucault. While these styles of criticism are sensitive to the way that traditions embody power relations, they too suffer from an insufficiently pluralist understanding of context and they use this to debunk the normative views which are required to direct the redescriptive work of social criticism. Dissatisfaction with historical materialism has prompted many on the left to adopt a Foucauldian style of criticism while others remain suspicious of what they regard as post-modern irresponsibility. However the point insisted upon here is that, despite philosophical differences, both versions of social criticism are disabled by their hostility to normative deliberation and their resulting normative inarticulacy.

Finally, it was argued that, having disposed of reductive accounts of contextualisation, socio-historical contextualisation and normative deliberation could be usefully combined to form an interpretive social criticism. Insofar as judgement combines beliefs about circumstances with beliefs about normative principles the redescription of circumstances has the potential to effect a revision of one's judgements. It was also argued that, on account of the way that our deliberations take place against the backdrop of inherited languages and institutionalised problematics, the contextualisation of these can also lead to a revision of our beliefs, theoretical and normative. While the choice of conceptual schemes employed in contextualisation depends on the sort of problem, or aspect of a problem, faced by the interpreter concerned, it is emphasised that social criticism is premised on the absence of self-transparency and the possibility of redescription, so that schemes which can accommodate this are to be preferred over those which do not.

Having indicated the way in which socio-historical contextualisation and normative theorising may be combined, it is then argued that the ethical concerns of contextualism: with the recognition of identities and perspectives, and with the transformation of oppressive identities can both be accommodated, and, indeed, much more effectively advanced, within the framework of impartial public deliberation. This normative framework is necessary if these concerns are to be adequately addressed for, as argued in Chapters and Four and Five, concerning hermeneutic-based and radical styles of social criticism, the contextualisms examined here lack the normative resources necessary to distinguish between those perspectives worthy of respect and those in need of transformation.

The connection between liberalism and deliberative democracy is examined and a distinctively egalitarian argument for the duty to deliberate is identified. This, it is argued, is what commits liberals to impartial public deliberation and as such to engaging in the sort of interpretive social criticism outlined above. If public justifications are to be constructed then engagement with and criticism of the identities and perspectives of others and an openness to the criticism of one's own identities and perspectives is required by the commitment to impartiality. The claim that 'political liberalism' is 'apolitical' and that impartiality serves to circumscribe deliberation and limit contestation is misconceived. An interpretive social

criticism is not only possible but is *required* by the commitment to impartiality. The result is a conception of politics which finds a place for context and situation within liberal egalitarian politics without compromising critical morality.

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