Interpretation and Social Criticism

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THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

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The first two of these lectures were given as the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Harvard University on November 13 and 14, 1985. The third was given at Harvard Hillel on November 15. The three were written at roughly the same time, employ the same vocabulary, make the same arguments; they belong together, the last supplying what the first two largely lack: some degree of historical concreteness and specificity.

My aim is to provide a philosophical framework for the understanding of social criticism as a social practice. What do social critics do? How do they go about doing it? Where do the critic's principles come from? How does he establish his distance from the people and institutions he criticizes? The argument sustained through the three lectures, that social criticism is best understood as critical interpretation, runs parallel to arguments made in recent years by European philosophers. But I have tried to find my own way, in my own language, without direct reference to their work. I hope to publish in the near future a larger book dealing with the practice of criticism in the twentieth century — a more explicitly political book, for which these lectures constitute a theoretical preamble. There I will have occasion to address the question, as much political as it is philosophical, whether social criticism is possible without "critical theory."

I am grateful to the many members of the Harvard community, critics all, who attended these lectures and explained to me where I had gone wrong. My revisions certainly reflect their criticism — especially that of Martha Minow, Michael Sandel, Thomas Scanlon, Judith Shklar, and Lloyd Weinreb — though the reflection is probably, as often as not, obscure and incomplete. "The Prophet as Social Critic," in an earlier version, was discussed at a symposium on prophecy at Drew University and published in the Drew

Gateway *along with a helpful response by Henry French. A number of people here at the Institute for Advanced Study read the lectures for me and commented on them in detail: Clifford Geertz, Don Herzog, Michael Rustin, and Alan Wertheimer. They had a lot to do with, though they are not responsible for, their final form.*

I. THREE PATHS IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Despite my title, I shall not argue in this lecture that there are three and only three ways of doing moral philosophy. It's not my purpose to suggest an exhaustive list, only to look at three common and important approaches to the subject. I shall call these the path of discovery, the path of invention, and the path of interpretation. I mean to describe the last as the one (of the three) that accords best with our everyday experience of morality. Then, in my second lecture, I shall try to defend interpretation against the charge that it binds us irrevocably to the status quo — since we can only interpret what already exists — and so undercuts the very possibility of social criticism. Since criticism is a feature of everyday morality, the charge has a twofold character: it suggests not only that interpretation is a bad program for, but also that it is a bad account of, moral experience. It is, as they say, neither normatively nor descriptively correct. I shall argue against both these aspects of the charge, proceeding in this first lecture by way of theoretical contrast, in the second by way of practical example, focusing more on the account here, more on the program there, but not tying myself to this simple and probably misleading division. The third lecture will bring account and program together in an extended historical analysis of social criticism, in this case biblical prophecy, in the interpretive mode.

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We know the path of discovery first and best from the history of religion. Here, to be sure, discovery waits upon revelation; but

someone must climb the mountain, go into the desert, seek out the God-who-reveals, and bring back his word. This man or woman is for the rest of us the discoverer of the moral law: if God reveals it to him, he reveals it to us. Like the physical world, like life itself, morality is a creation; but we are not its creators. God makes it, and we come, with his help and with the help of his servants, to know about it and then to admire and study it. Religious morality commonly takes the form of a written text, a sacred book, and so it requires interpretation. But we first experience it through the medium of discovery. The moral world is like a new continent, and the religious leader (God's servant) is like an explorer who brings us the good news of its existence and the first map of its shape.

I should note one significant feature of this map. The moral world is not only divinely created; it is constituted by divine commands. What is revealed to us is a set of decrees: do this! don't do that! And these decrees are critical in character, critical from the beginning, for it would hardly be a revelation if God commanded us to do and not do what we were already doing and not doing. A revealed morality will always stand in sharp contrast to old ideas and practices. That may well be its chief advantage. But it is, necessarily, a short-lived advantage, for once the revelation is accepted, once the new moral world is inhabited, the critical edge is lost. Now God's decrees, so at least we pretend to ourselves, regulate our everyday behavior; we are what he wants us to be. Any morality that has once been discovered, of course, can always be rediscovered. The claim to have found again some long-lost or corrupted doctrine is the basis of every religious and moral reformation. But God is not present now in the same way as he was in the beginning. *Re*discovery does not wait upon revelation; it is our own work, archaeological in form; and we have to interpret what we dig up. The moral law rediscovered lacks the blazing clarity of its first coming.

I mean this brief account of religious morality as a prelude to a more secular story. There are natural as well as divine revelations, and a philosopher who reports to us on the existence of natural law, say, or natural rights, or any set of objective moral truths has walked the path of discovery. Perhaps he has walked it as a kind of moral anthropologist, searching for what is natural in what is real. More likely, given the standard form of the philosophical enterprise, the search is internal, mental, a matter of detachment and reflection. 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 argued in his own Tanner Lectures, from "no particular point of view." [1] 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. That is, if I understand the argument, he sees himself and all the others, himself no different from the others, and he recognizes the moral principles that necessarily govern the relations of creatures like those.

The necessity, clearly, is moral, not practical, else we would not have to step back to discover it. Hence the principles, once again, are critical principles; they exist at some distance from our parochial practices and opinions. And once we have discovered them, or once they have been announced to us, we ought to incorporate them into our everyday moral life. But I confess to less confidence in this secular discovery than in the earlier religious discovery. Most often, the moral principles here delivered to us are already in our possession, incorporated, as it were, long ago, fami-

[1] "The Limits of Objectivity," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. I (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 83. Cf. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

liar and well-thumbed by now. Philosophical discovery is likely to fall short of the radical newness and sharp specificity of divine revelation. Accounts of natural law or natural rights rarely ring true as descriptions of a new moral world. Consider Professor Nagel's discovery of an objective moral principle, the only one specified and defended in his lectures: that we should not be indifferent to the suffering of other people.[2] I acknowledge the principle but miss the excitement of revelation. I knew that already. What is involved in discoveries of this sort is something like a dis-incorporation of moral principles, so that we can see them, not for the first time but freshly, stripped of encrusted interests and prejudices. Seen in this way, the principles may well look objective; we "know" them in much the same way as religious men and women know the divine law. They are, so to speak, *there*, waiting to be enforced. But they are only there because they are really here, features of ordinary life.

I don't mean to deny the reality of the experience of stepping back, though I doubt that we can ever step back all the way to nowhere; even when we look at the world from *somewhere else*, however, we are still looking at the world. We are looking, in fact, at a particular world; we may see it with special clarity, but we will not discover anything that isn't already there. Since the particular world is also our own world, we will not discover anything that isn't already here. Perhaps this is a general truth about secular (moral) discoveries; if so, it suggests what we lose when we lose our belief in God.

But I have been assuming a philosopher who strains to see more clearly, if only in abstract outline, the moral reality in front of him. One can, by contrast, call that reality into question and set out in search of a deeper truth, like a physicist piercing the

[2] "Limits of Objectivity," pp. 109–10. In his own social criticism, Professor Nagel relies on more substantive principles. To what extent these are "objective" principles, I am not sure. See Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8.

atom. Thus the moral philosophy called utilitarianism, founded on a very small number of psychological axioms: godless in its origins and radically unfamiliar in its outcomes, utilitarianism suggests what we gain by the imitation of science. Bentham obviously believed that he had discovered objective truth, and the applications of this truth are, very often, not recognizable at all as features of ordinary life.[3] Frightened by the strangeness of their own arguments, most utilitarian philosophers fiddle with the felicific calculus so that it yields results closer to what we all think. So they pull the exception back to the rule: without confidence in revelation, we can only discover what we know. Philosophy is a second coming (lower case) which brings us, not millennial understanding, but the wisdom of the owl at dusk. There is, though, this alternative, which I will later find more frightening than attractive: the wisdom of the eagle at daybreak.

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Many people, perhaps for good reasons, won't be satisfied with the wisdom of the owl. Some will deny its objectivity, despite the detachment of the philosophers who seek it out; but that is not a denial I want to defend. I am inclined to agree with Professor Nagel's sardonic view of the skeptic's question, What reason can I possibly have for *not* being indifferent to my neighbor's pain? What reason can I have for caring, even a little bit? Nagel writes: "As an expression of puzzlement, [this] has that characteristic philosophical craziness which indicates that something very fundamental has gone wrong."[4] Yes, but what is more worrisome than

[3] Bentham suggests that utilitarianism is the only plausible account of what ordinary people think about morality, but his ambition goes far beyond providing such an account. He claims to have discovered the foundation of morality: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do. . . ." *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ch. I. It is apparent in the rest of the *Principles* that these two masters don't always point to what ordinary people think *they* ought to do.

[4] "Limits of Objectivity," p. 110.

this craziness is the sense I have already expressed, that the moral principles revealed in this or that undoubtedly sane philosophy lack the special edge, the critical force, of divine revelation. "Don't be indifferent . . ." is not at all the same thing as "Love thy neighbor as thyself." And the second of these is unlikely to figure in the list of philosophical discoveries — if only because the question, Why should I love him *that much*? isn't crazy. The principle of non-indifference — let's call it, more positively, the principle of minimal concern — is conceivably a critical principle, but its strength is uncertain. A great deal of work would have to be done, and it's not clear that it could be done by a man or woman standing nowhere in particular (or even by a man or woman standing somewhere else), to work out its relation to everyday social practice.

On the other hand, men and women standing nowhere in particular could construct an entirely new moral world — imitating God's creation rather than the discoveries of his servants. They might undertake to do this because they thought that there was no actually existing moral world (because God was dead, or mankind radically alienated from nature, or nature devoid of moral meaning); or they might undertake the construction because they thought that the actually existing moral world was inadequate or that our knowledge of it could never be, as knowledge, sufficiently critical in character. We might think of this undertaking in terms Descartes suggests when he describes his intellectual project (in the *Discourse on Method*): "to reform my own thoughts and to build on a foundation wholly my own." In fact, I suppose, Descartes was really launched on a journey of discovery, "like a man who walks alone, and in the dark," searching for objective truth.[5] But in the analogies that leap to his mind, there is no objective

[5] Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. by F. E. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1968), pp. 38, 39.

truth to discover, and the project is explicitly constructive in character.

> So I thought to myself that the peoples who were formerly half savages, and who became civilized only gradually, making their laws only insofar as the harm done by crimes and quarrels forced them to do so, could not be so well organized as those who, from the moment at which they came together in association, observed the basic laws of some wise legislator; just as it is indeed certain that the state of the true religion, the laws of which God alone has made, must be incomparably better ordered than all the others. And, to speak of human things, I believe that, if Sparta greatly flourished in times past, it was not on account of the excellence of each of its laws taken individually, seeing that many were very strange and even contrary to good morals, but because, having been invented by one man only, they all tended towards the same end.[6]

This is the path of invention; the end is given by the morality we hope to invent. The end is a common life, where justice, or political virtue, or goodness, or some such basic value would be realized.

So we are to design the moral world under this condition: that there is no pre-existent design, no divine or natural blueprint to guide us. How should we proceed? We need a discourse on method for moral philosophy, and most philosophers who have walked the path of invention have begun with methodology: a design of a design procedure. (The existentialists, who don't begin that way, though they are clearly committed to an invented morality, are of little help in the business of invention.) The crucial requirement of a design procedure is that it eventuate in agreement. Hence the work of Descartes' legislator is very risky unless he is a representative figure, somehow embodying the range of opinions and interests that are in play around him. We can't adopt the simple expedient of making the legislator omnipotent, a

[6] *Discourse on Method*, p. 36.