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Excerpt

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I

Introduction: from representation to *poiesis*

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I

Twice upon a time, in both the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries and again in the twentieth-century heydays of logical atomism and logical positivism, the task of philosophy – so Richard Rorty¹ and Ian Hacking² have reminded us – was to provide a critical theory of representations of the world. By sorting representations – mental or linguistic, as may be – into the accurate and well-founded vs. the inaccurate and ill-founded, different cultural practices might be submitted to critical judgment. This is possible insofar as “culture is,” in Rorty’s words, “the assemblage of claims to knowledge,”³ or perhaps, more weakly, in so far as cultural practices as various as preparing food, making paintings, building houses, and telling stories about ancestors all presuppose claims to knowledge. If the representations or knowledge-claims that a given bit of culture either is or presupposes are themselves in good order, then that bit of culture is itself well-founded; if not, then not. If *that* – foxglove – is *in fact* a poisonous plant, then (given a desire to avoid the poisonous) one ought not to eat it; if *mass* is in fact an essential property of physical objects, then one will do best to understand how physical bodies will move under certain conditions by, among other things, weighing them. Out of a critical theory of representations, philosophy, it was hoped, would derive a critical theory of culture.

As Rorty, Hacking, and numerous other writers on the death of epistemology have suggested, however, this project has also twice foundered on a dilemma. What is the status of the intended theory of representations itself? Either it is simply taken for granted that this theory of representations itself represents representations correctly and that the privileged set of first-order representations of the world

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that it favors is likewise accurate, in which case it is dogmatic and uncritical; or this theory of representations is itself taken to be in need of some guarantor of its accuracy and of the accuracy of the first-order representations that it favors, in which case an infinite regress ensues and the theory fails to provide a basis for assessing culture and cultural practices. In Hegel's trenchant image, if reality "is supposed to be brought nearer to us through this instrument [a theory of representations together with a set of favored, first-order representations], without anything in it being altered, like a bird caught by a lime-twig, it [reality] would surely laugh our little ruse to scorn, if it were not with us, in and for itself, all along, and of its own volition."⁴

Not only does the effort to construct a critical theory of representations founder between dogmatism and skepticism, it also arguably both reposes on inconsistent assumptions and misrepresents human interests. Developing a line of argument that he sees as realized in various ways in the writings of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty, Charles Taylor has claimed that the epistemological project of constructing a critical theory of representations rests on an incoherent picture of the single human knower as primitively and self-sufficiently a subject or bearer of representational states. Within the epistemological project, Taylor writes, the state of having a representation in mind (whether mental or linguistic) is conceived of as "an ultimately incoherent amalgam of two features: (a) these states (the ideas) are self-enclosed, in the sense that they can be accurately identified and described in abstraction from the 'outside' world ... and (b) they nevertheless point toward and represent things in that world."⁵ Only if both (a) and (b) are true does the project of stepping back from all presuppositions and commitments, and thence reflectively *testing* representations for their accuracy, make any sense. Yet the amalgam is incoherent. To the extent that representations do present or point to things in the world, they are – arguably – shapes or sound patterns or images that are themselves in use in the world. Moreover, the interests that human beings have in using representations to form judgments may well be much wider than cognitive interests alone, and may be interests the pursuit of which is effectively undermined by taking cognitive interests to be of paramount importance. By attempting to stand back from all presuppositions and commitments, in the cognitive interest of identifying unprejudiced and well-founded representations, we may not only get nowhere: we may also distort and repress genuine but less

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obviously cognitive interests that we do have – interests in justice or freedom, say. In this way, as Hegel observes, “fear of error [within the epistemological project] reveals itself rather as fear of the truth [as truthful living and the satisfaction of genuine interests].”⁶

One way out of this impasse faced by representationalist epistemologies is to consider representations *not* as self-standing, reality-related packets in either mind or language, but instead as markers or signifiers in use in a population. In this way it becomes possible to connect the uses of representations or signifiers with other actions in practice that are carried out in the pursuit of other interests. Thinking, or entertaining representations in mind, and using linguistic representations in speaking and writing then become subsets of the many things that human beings do in pursuing many and various interests. Thought and language-use are reset within wider frameworks of human practical life.

Depending, however, on what wider interests human beings are taken to have and on how these wider frameworks of practical life are taken to be set, this way of thinking about representations can yield wildly different stances on human life and thought. Are there any interests that are simply given, and, if so, how? Or are all interests predominantly set by local and personal facticity, without deeper constraints? Are human subjects capable of an adequate and clear consciousness of their interests, however they are set? Or do these interests, bound up with the possibilities of life that culture affords, remain always in part opaque to reflective intelligence? Different answers to these questions will yield radically different ways of moving beyond Cartesian representationalism. Three broad kinds of anti-Cartesian stances have been especially prominent of late.

(1) *Naturalism*: It might be held that certain human interests – pre-eminently those in food, clothing, shelter, freedom from pain and misery, and so on – are simply given biologically. Human action is dominated by these interests that are given naturally, and by other, later interests (for example, in nurturing pride, in decoration) that grow out of these earlier ones according to natural patterns of growth and development. Theorists of thought, language, and action as different from one another as Noam Chomsky, W. V. O. Quine, Bernard Williams, J. L. Mackie, and E. O. Wilson all hold views of this kind, differing only about which specific interests are first given naturally and about the mental or neural mechanisms through which those interests are implemented and developed. Behind our lives

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with representations, it is suggested, lie our lives as evolved, biological systems within a larger system of physical nature.

(2) *Linguistic idealism*: It might be held that nothing governs our actions, thoughts, and uses of language beside our own creations. Concepts such as *rightness, piety, goodness, honor, efficiency, and duty*, that human agents have typically, but variously, used to describe and assess courses of action, are not built into the order of nature, either in our brains or as part of reality. The fact that these concepts vary widely in how they sort actions, without having a common core, suggests that nothing but our own creativity as it plays itself out in linguistic-social life lies behind them. As Rorty observes, defending this view, “the notions of criteria and choice (including that of ‘arbitrary choice’) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another. Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.”⁷ It may not be that our words causally create electrons or geological formations. But our words may be responsible for dividing things up into the categories under which we take them to fall in the course of pursuing our interests (themselves thus created). Behind this life of language lies no punctual, individual, cognizing subject, no given order of nature, and no God. Our complex, conflicting, and always evolving habits of usage themselves determine how we classify and identify things – how we represent them to ourselves – in ways that are then not under the control of either reality or individual knowledge and will. Views of this kind have been prominent in strains of recent literary theory that have been influenced by Saussure’s claims (themselves detached from Saussure’s program of generating a semantic science of how conventional connections between signifiers and signifieds are laid down) about the arbitrariness of the signifier. As Catherine Belsey puts it, the thought is that “the world, which otherwise without signification would be experienced as a continuum, is divided up by language into entities which readily come to be experienced as essentially different.”⁸

(3) *Cultural materialism*: Partly making use of post-Saussurean hostility to kinds written into the order of nature, but partly in disappointment with idealism and in pursuit of the thought that *something*, but not nature, must constrain human actions and the

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development of systems of representations (what would it be to “experience the world as a continuum” anyway? – the thought makes little sense), the thought arises that human acting, thinking, and language-using are constrained or determined by sociological configurations of power. Moving from Saussure to Marx, Foucault, and Althusser (often by way of Freud and Lacan), the thought is that human beings live out their lives, and take up courses of thought and action, within social frameworks. These social frameworks are above all frameworks of opposition and domination. In any known or imaginable form of social life, certain rights and privileges are somehow allotted differentially to members of opposed groups. Women may not inherit property, while men can. Owners of the instruments of production may “steal” embodied labor through the mechanisms of capitalist production, while wage-workers cannot. Gays may be diagnosed as mentally ill and subjected to courses of medical treatment, while heterosexuals are regarded as normal and healthy. These kinds of divisions – determined socially and historically, not by physical or biological nature alone – affect how people think about themselves and their courses of action. The systems of representations that people use to think about themselves and their lives thus reflect their positions within one or another framework of social antagonisms. No one thing – not nature, not consciousness and will, not a history of technological development, not God – stands behind the development of social frameworks that embody domination. Rather, power is fluidly manifested in all social structures, without source and without a possibility of cure. As Foucault puts it,

Power’s condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to understand its exercise, and which also makes it possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of intelligibility of the social order, must not be set in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And “Power,” insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement.⁹

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Against Cartesian conceptions of a punctual subject, self-sufficiently sorting through its representations for reliability one by one, each of these stances has considerable charm and power. Surely it is right to see human action, thought, and language-use arising within a natural framework; surely language evolves, often in ways that are unpredictable by appeal to either natural processes or individual will; surely the presence of changing varieties of domination in social life is an historical fact that is of significance for how we act, think, and use language. But each position also suffers from two limitations. Within each stance a metaphysical scheme is dogmatically assumed. Either the ultimate authority of nature over the formation of thoughts and desires and social life is taken for granted, or idealism is embraced, or power is cast as an ineliminable, but in principle uncentered, unintelligible, and unassessable metaphysical fact. Moreover, against the force of these metaphysical assumptions, no morality of aspiration is articulable. In each case, the governing way of thinking about action, thought, and language forces us toward *explaining* how in fact human beings act, think, and use language, without articulating how they might do these things better than they do now. No routes toward partial, further rational independence and social freedom are either discerned or discernible. The very ideas of rational independence under norms and of social freedom become nearly unintelligible. Thinking of our systems of representations, and of our lives with them, as somehow *determined* – by nature, by nothing, or by power, as may be – we then alternate between (inconsistent) reversions to Cartesian voluntarism and clarity in choice, ecstatic embraces of a post-modern sublime, of what Lyotard calls “the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which denies itself the solace of good forms,”¹⁰ and submission to natural or cultural fate.

And this, we may think, cannot be right. Perhaps our lives and thoughts and expressions are not our own as punctual, clairvoyant, Cartesian, originative subjects, either actually or potentially. But can it be that behind our lives and thoughts and expressions there is only either physical-biological nature, or nothing, or power? Can we simply know one of these metaphysical stances to be true? Or is it rather that all at once, as beings who possess cognitive interests, moral interests, and natural endowments, and who are set within cultural matrices of both interest and domination, we nonetheless dimly but actively refigure our representations and rearticulate our interests?

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To think about the human subject in this way, as departing from multiple natural and cultural interests and endowments, thence actively to refigure representations and effectively to rearticulate interests, is to conceive of the human subject as a subject of and within *poiesis*.¹¹ As Plato and Aristotle use the term, *poiesis* is the name for any activity of making, as opposed to *theoria* (observing, theorizing) or *praxis* (acting, doing). More narrowly, it specifically means the making of any *imitative representation* (*mimesis*), no matter whether in prose or verse or painting or music (as a *mimesis* of emotions).¹² So used, *poiesis* is not solely the making of something that is merely fictional or unreal, since a *mimesis* or imitative representation presents aspects of things that are. As Paul Shorey usefully remarks, “Imitation means for [Plato and Aristotle] not only the portrayal or description of visible and tangible things, but more especially the communication of a mood or feeling, hence the (to a modern) paradox that music is the most imitative of the arts.”¹³

Poetic imitation is distinguished from the construction of a *logos* (definition or account) through *theoria* in the interests of knowledge or science (*episteme*). Thus the metaphysical-biological account of man as a rational animal will be a part of *episteme* and a product of *theoria*, not a poetic imitation. But poetic imitation is the means of representing appearances, moods, characters, human moral and political interests, and actions and their meanings, among many other things. These are, we might say, things that are *portrayed* by us in our speech – figurations of how things appear to us, of what our interests are, of what our actions mean – not things that are captured by us in the course of our scientific theorizing about nature. They are representations of subjects, their characters, their interests, and their possible stances in culture that are made by subjects and that in turn help to make them, insofar as they make available certain routes of self-construal and of action and identity in culture. Such figurations will be, in Plato’s and Aristotle’s terminology, *poetic representations*, *mimemata* that are products of *poiesis*, and they are far from insignificant for human life, far from idle objects of aesthetic delectation.

The forming of poetic imitations, hence engaging in the activity of *poiesis*, is arguably central to the life of any human subject. We articulate and evince our characters in our actions, and we respond continuously to our senses of the characters of others. We articulate our interests – things that are not simply given in the order of physical nature, in material culture, or by personal situation and individual will – as we envision courses of action and character

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formation that are fulfilling for us. These articulations of interests and of possibilities of action and identity are the vehicles of our cultures' various lives in us and of our lives in cultures, in such a way that it is a mistake to think of these articulations as either simply given, simply discovered, simply invented, or simply willed. As products of *poiesis*, these articulations both *represent* subjects and their interests, and yet also fail to do so: as products of imaginative power calling to ways of cultural life not yet in being, they allude to an ongoing and unmasterable historicity of human life. We appear to ourselves and to one another under certain roles, within plots of character development and of the pursuit of interest that we inhabit. We appear to ourselves and to one another, multiply and variously, as sons or daughters, as members of certain political parties, as bearers of certain tastes or interests in the arts, as lovers and co-workers, consumers and laborers, bosses and correspondents.

These roles are in conflict with one another in the culture, and so also in us, we who multiply inhabit them. Being a daughter, a painter, a boss, and a politically engaged citizen calls for casts of mind and ways of thinking about actions and their meanings that are not easily reconciled with one another. The tensions or oppositions here are so great that many recent writers – aware of the proliferation of cultural roles and of the antagonisms that lie between such roles – have begun to doubt whether there is any unity to the subject at all, to doubt whether there is any locus of rational freedom within the subject that embraces and organizes how one participates in the multiple roles one occupies. Perhaps the subject is a nothing, particularly if there is no self-present punctual subject, able effectively on its own to pursue cognitive interests that are central to any other interests it also has.

And yet we seem to wish effectively to integrate our various roles with one another as coherent and complementary expressions of our humanity and free personality. *We appear to ourselves* as having various interests and desires and characters, as caring about various things and occupying various social roles, and we wish to achieve coherence and integrity in freely and reasonably bearing these multiple cares and concerns, whose coherence and integrity are readily, and painfully, felt to be lacking. Or, as Hegel remarks in characterizing the sort of self-consciousness that comes with having a propositional, judgmental consciousness, wherein *one takes oneself* to be following rules in judging the contents of experience:

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The antithesis of [consciousness'] appearance and its truth has, however, for its essence only the truth, viz. the unity of self-consciousness with itself; this unity must become essential to self-consciousness, i.e. self-consciousness is *Desire* in general. In this sphere [of self-consciousness as involving an effort to achieve its coherence, integrity, and unity] self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this antithesis is removed, and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it [German: *wird*: becomes or comes about].¹⁴

For Hegel, the overcoming of the antithesis between self-consciousness' housing in multiple roles, on the one hand, and its unity to be achieved, on the other hand, involves at least the development of a fully coherent culture, within which subjects will *recognize* or *acknowledge* one another's rational humanity and free personality as they are expressed in roles that are no longer brutally at odds with one another. It is in and through these recognitions or acknowledgments that are won from those with whom one shares a coherent culture of rational freedom that one's own unity of self-consciousness is achieved. "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged [*es ist nur als ein Anerkenntnes*: it is only as an object of recognition] . . . The detailed exposition of the Notion of this spiritual unity in its duplication will present us with the process of Recognition [*Anerkennung*]."¹⁵

Even for Hegel, however, no substance or agency that is external to human subjectivity guarantees that the achievement of a unified self-consciousness in and through a coherent culture of rational freedom will come off. To suppose there is some such substance or agency would be dogmatically to assume a cosmological-metaphysical stance, in advance of a critical examination of human subjectivity and its always emerging possibilities of development. Though Hegel himself looked forward to the imminent inauguration of a coherent culture of freedom, whose structural institutions and predominant modes of activity he undertook to describe, there is nonetheless, in his thinking, nothing external to our own collective, divided subjectivities and their efforts that is to bring such a culture about. *Geist* or Spirit is, for Hegel, fully immanent within human subjectivities in their natural and cultural situations, somewhat in the way in which a personality is immanent in the ways in which one takes an interest in, and responds to, things. A personality just *is* certain patterns of shifting interest and responsiveness, partly latent and partly actual in consciousness, not a separate something that is behind them. Just so, for Hegel, with *Geist* or Spirit and

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human subjectivities, together with their possibilities of development, in their cultural and natural situations. The extent to which the lack of any substance external to human subjectivities might, contrary to Hegel's optimism, leave these subjectivities ever at odds with one another and internally divided, without fully unified self-consciousness, is perhaps a topic that is best left to us to dwell on, as we consider our own possibilities of development, just as various of Hegel's precursors and contemporaries did.

Strikingly, in rejecting the existence of any substance or agency external to our collective, partially unified, partially divided subjectivities – in rejecting dogmatic reliance on a metaphysical cosmology – Hegel is in fact taking up a line of thought that is already powerfully developed by Kant. Kant tells us that the law of duty – the law which commands the formation of a rational-moral culture of freedom as an earthly kingdom of ends, within which reciprocal respect and recognition, and with them lived rational self-consciousness, are achieved in daily routines – has no basis other than free human personality itself, in its present, and persisting, partial unity and partial self-dividedness.

Duty! Thou sublime and mighty name that dost embrace nothing charming or insinuating but requirest submission and yet seekest not to move the will by threatening aught that would arouse natural aversion or terror, but only holdest forth a law which of itself finds entrance into the mind and yet gains reluctant reverence (though not always obedience) – a law before which all inclinations are dumb even though they secretly work against it: what origin is there worthy of thee, and where is to be found the root of thy noble descent which proudly rejects all kinship with the inclinations and from which to be descended is the indispensable condition of the only worth which men can give themselves?

It cannot be less than something which elevates man above himself as a part of the world of sense, something which connects him with an order of things which only the understanding can think and which has under it the entire world of sense, including the empirically determinable existence of man in time, and the whole system of all ends which is alone suitable to such unconditional practical laws as the moral. It is nothing else than personality, i.e., the freedom and independence from the mechanism of nature regarded as a capacity of a being which is subject to special laws (pure practical laws given by its own reason), so that the person as belonging to the world of sense is subject to his own personality so far as he belongs to the intelligible world.¹⁶

One way to sum up the thought that we are thus elevated by our free personalities – in their partial unities and in their struggles to submit inclinations to the law of freedom – above the world of sense, the