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978-0-521-57849-3 - Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation

Gillian Rose

Excerpt

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## Introduction

It is strange to live in a time when philosophy has found so many ways to damage if not to destroy itself. One by one all of the classical preoccupations of philosophy have been discredited and discarded: eternity, reason, truth, representation, justice, freedom, beauty and the Good. The dismissal of 'metaphysics' is accompanied by the unabated search for a *new ethics*. Yet no one seems to have considered what philosophical resources remain for an ethics when so much of the live tradition is disqualified and deadened.

From Marx to Heidegger (and before and beyond), it has become *de rigueur* to charge your predecessor with adherence to 'metaphysics', and to claim your 'new method' to be, exclusively and exhaustively, the overcoming of the tradition. Ethical integrity is reclaimed by each new generation who must murder their intellectual fathers in order to obtain the licence to practise the profession that they learnt from them. Today, fifty years after the end of the Second World War, three more or less buried strata of the post-war settlement suddenly demand attention and address: the Holocaust, Heidegger's Nazism, the disintegration of

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Communism, perceived as the 'final' defeat of Marxism. To respond to this triple loss of authority, of Marxism, of Heideggerianism, and of our ability to come to terms with the Holocaust, by once again reviving the accusation that the Western philosophical tradition in general and modern philosophy in particular are 'metaphysical', and to resume once more the search for an uncontaminated ethics is to overlook the much more disturbing possibility that it may be the very severance of ethics from metaphysics that undermines the value and effectivity of both metaphysics and ethics. In both the world of politics and in the intellectual world, there seems to be a low tolerance of equivocation. The result of this intolerance and unease is the reproduction of dualistic ways of thinking and of formulating public policy. In philosophy 'truth' or 'reason', in their perennial or in their modern meanings, are charged with legitimising forms of domination which have destroyed or suppressed their 'others' in the name of the universal interest. *Pari passu*, in politics, across the spectrum of Western political parties, there is a consensus that attributes the insufficiencies of welfare liberalism or socialism of the post-war period to waste of resources and bureaucratisation. The indictment is extended to the principle of government as such, whether in the name of the new libertarianism or the new communitarianism. Why is it that a perceived equivocation or drawback, whether in 'reason' or 'truth' or 'welfare', results in an apparently wholesale rejection of the principle involved? You would expect the discovery of a limitation to require thorough analysis of principle and practice, so that the strengths and shortcomings of ideas and policies may be revised or modified in the light of experience. Wisdom, theoretical and practical, develops when the different outcomes of ideas and policies are related to the predictable modifications and to the unpredictable con-

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tingencies affecting their meaning and employment. Wisdom works with equivocation.

The unsparing revulsion against the fallen idols and the rush to espouse their formerly degraded ‘others’ perpetuate dualisms in which all the undesirable features of the original term are reinforced and reappear in its ostensibly newly revealed and valorised ‘other’.

The current debate between liberals and communitarians in political philosophy, which translates at its extremes into the political polarisation of ‘libertarians’ and ‘cultural or “ethnic” pluralism’, displays the logic of this reversal. Liberals defend the autonomy and independence of the individual as conceived in the legal notion of human and civic ‘rights’, across the range of social and political meanings from ‘entitlement’ to ‘free choice’, while communitarians draw attention to the embeddedness of individuals in networks of shared meanings and social norms. The recent debate revives the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debate over the radical rights enshrined in the French Revolution which provoked the conservative response based on custom and tradition. One can hear echoes of Kant versus Herder, Paine versus Burke or Sieyès and Renan, over the nature of political nationality: whether the voluntary association of free individuals constitutes the polity, or whether the organic community resting on history, territory, language and custom, cements the social and political bond. ‘Libertarians’ and ‘cultural pluralists’ derive institutional consequences from these opposed theoretical positions. The ‘libertarian’ argues for the minimal state and minimal taxes, leaving the greatest possible range of decisions and resources to the ‘free’ choice of the individual. An extreme version of this standpoint argues that even law and order should be privatised. ‘Cultural pluralists’ argue that political identity is no longer formed by class

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interests and allegiance. The post-colonial fragmentation of modern societies has given rise to diverse 'ethnic' communalities, based on 'race', religion, language, and gender constituencies. This perception justifies 'identity politics', the promotion of preferential legislation to redress and advance the 'empowerment' of previously disadvantaged cultural 'categories' of people. Intellectually, the political spectrum is divided between these alternatives: between the arbitrariness of the 'libertarian' individual and the arbitrariness of the 'communitarian' interest group.

Now, these two apparently warring engagements have a lot in common; and they participate in the very archetype which they claim to overthrow: the proto-rationality of a prescriptive political totality, justified as the fulfilment of history, truth, freedom and justice – as the unity of metaphysics and ethics. By maligning all putative universality as 'totalitarian' and seeking to liberate the 'individual' or the 'plurality' from domination, both the libertarian and the communitarian disqualify themselves from any understanding of the actualities of structure and authority, intrinsic to any conceivable social and political constitution and which their opposed stances still leave intact. The libertarian argument presupposes formal-legal rationality, just as the communitarian argument presupposes traditional rationality; both are types of legitimising domination as authority. Politics begins not when you organise to defend an individual or particular or local interest, but when you organise to further the 'general' interest within which your particular interest may be represented. As a result of this shared refusal to take responsibility for what Weber called the 'legitimate violences' of modern politics, libertarianism and communitarianism require other agencies to act on their behalf. Libertarian extensions of the right of 'individuals', the right to purchase and consume goods and services, presuppose and widen the

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already unequal distribution of opportunities and resources within a capitalist society. Extension of individual rights amounts to an extension not an attenuation of coercion: it calls for a reinforcement of the police function to contain the consequences of inequality. Communitarian empowerment of 'ethnic' and gender pluralities presupposes and fixes a given distribution of 'identities' in a radically dynamic society. 'Empowerment' legitimises the potential tyranny of the local or particular community in its relations with its members and at the boundary with competing interests. It is the abused who become the abusers; no one and no community is exempt from the paradoxes of 'empowerment'.

In their abstract and general opposition to the state, power, rationality and truth, libertarianism and communitarianism directly and indirectly aid and abet authoritarian power of control. They do so directly, by disowning the coercive immediacy of the type of action legitimated, and indirectly, in the way the stance at stake disowns the political implications of legitimated violence and so re-imposes that burden on agents and agencies of the state. These reversals in the planned reconfiguration of power arise from the attempt to develop normative political alternatives to the modern state without any preliminary analysis of the actualities and possibilities for freedom and justice. Any account of 'freedom' and 'justice' is deemed to depend on the 'metaphysics' of truth. When 'metaphysics' is separated from ethics in this way, the result will be unanticipated political paradoxes.

One recent version of this separation of metaphysics from ethics understands itself as a 'neo-pragmatics'. It deliberately eschews any theory of justice, for all such theories are said to be dependent on the metaphysics of objective truth independent of language. The pernicious holism of truth is attributed to the modern tradition whereby the theory of subjectivity, the theory of

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the freedom of the individual, is regarded as the basis of the possibility of collective freedom and justice. Cast as generally as this, the indictment of liberal metaphysics also applies to corporatist, and to revolutionary theories, and, in effect, to the overcoming of nihilism. In the place of this metaphysical tradition the 'creation of self' is to be explored independently of any theory of justice, which is thereby restricted to the vaporous ethics of 'cruelty' limitation, learnt from modern literature and not from analysis or philosophy. This separation of the self from any theoretical account of justice is advertised as a 'neo-pragmatics' for it claims to follow the contours of contingency and to avoid all and any structures of prejudged truth. Commitment to the ineluctable contingencies of language, self and community is presented as 'ironism' by contrast with liberal, metaphysical 'rationalism'. 'Ironism', the celebration of the sheer promiscuity of all intellectual endeavour, depends on this opposition to any philosophical position which presupposes an independent reality to which its conceptuality aims to be in some sense adequate.

However, there is nothing 'ironic' about this outmoded and dualistic contrast between the embrace of the contingency of language versus commitment to objective reality. Philosophy has practised what the early Romantic theorists called 'the irony of irony' since the beginning of the nineteenth century in recognition of the inevitable subjectivity of our positings, and of the ever-painful shifts to further positings of the relation between 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity', which always fail to guarantee a sustainable reality. The phenomenological 'irony of irony' expounds this drama of experience as intrinsically ironic: it acquires the doubled title by virtue of the expanded and implicated rationality of its expositions. Experience, expounded as the changing configurations of the inevitable collision between the concepts of

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self and reality, between concepts of subject and object, takes place moreover intersubjectively. It is conceptually impossible to produce a taxonomy which would sequester concepts of justice and the good from concepts of 'self-creation', for the very formation of 'selfhood' takes place in interaction with the mingled ethical and epistemological positings of the other, the partner in the formation of our contingent and unstable identities.

If libertarianism, with 'ironism' as one version, and cultural pluralism, with its new claimants for 'empowerment', may be dubbed 'post-modernism', then I describe 'post-modernism' as *despairing rationalism without reason*. Far from devastating and discarding rationality, each standpoint aims to redefine it, for otherwise no argument could be devised, no analysis could be conducted, and no conclusion could be urged. Yet, by disqualifying universal notions of justice, freedom, and the good, for being inveterately 'metaphysical', for colonising and suppressing their others with the violence consequent on the chimera of correspondence, 'post-modernism' has no imagination for its own implied ground in justice, freedom and the good. This ground is therefore held in a transcendence far off the ground, where, with a mixture of naivety and cynicism, without reason and in despair, post-modernism leaves analysed and unanalysed according to its tenets the pre-conditions and rampant consequences of power, domination and authority. 'Despairing rationalism without reason' is, I claim, the story of post-modernism. It is the story of what happens when 'metaphysics' is barred from ethics.

Philosophy as I practise it has a different orientation based on a different logic and a different story. From Plato to Marx, I would argue, it is always possible to take the claims and conceptuality of philosophical works (I say 'works' not 'texts': the former implying

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the labour of the concept inseparable from its formal characteristics as opposed to the latter with its connotations of signifiers, the symbolic and semiotics) *deterministically* or *aporetically* – as fixed, closed conceptual structures, colonising being with the garrison of thought; or according to the difficulty which the conceptuality represents by leaving gaps and silences in the mode of representation. These alternatives are well-known in the case of Marx and Marxism. Marx's works can be interpreted deterministically: as formulating the iron laws of history from which the inevitable outcome of class struggle in the victory of the proletariat can be predicted. The same works can be interpreted aporetically: as stressing the gap between theory and practice, which strain towards each other; as insisting on the uncertain course of class struggle, which depends on the unpredictable configurations of objective conditions and the formation of class consciousness; as imagining the multiplicity of eventualities which might emerge between the extremes, 'Barbarism or Socialism'. Similarly, Plato's dialogues may be interpreted deterministically or aporetically. Both the Socratic dialogues and the non-Socratic dialogues can be read according to the 'two-worlds' dogma: a world of transcendent, immutable, eternal Forms or prototypes, and the unreal, mutable transient shadow world of types, which participate in the eternal world. While the aporetic nature of Aristotle's thought has been increasingly acknowledged in spite of its subsequent reduction to dogma by later Christian and Islamic thinkers, the parallel point needs to be stressed for Plato. Few words occur as frequently in the dialogues as 'aporia': it covers the difficulty of resolving, even of clarifying philosophical investigations, or even of deciding on the meaning of terms. Plato's aporia, like Aristotle's and Aristotelianism, is displaced by the tradition of Platonism – Plotinus, Proclus, Ficino.



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If the 'Western tradition' were to be approached aporetically and not deterministically or dogmatically, then the relation between metaphysics and ethics would acquire a different resonance and rationale. The gap between Platonic type and archetype, between the Aristotelian universal, the particular and the irreducibly singular, is not expunged by the nostalgia for presence evident in the compensatory concatenations of representation. The gaps indicate the irruption of thought: not the irruption of the city, alternately legitimate and illegitimate in its monopoly of domination and authority, of the means of violence in the actuality of power, into the peaceful groves of thought, but the perceived breakdown of Athenian democracy as the precondition and pain of the existence of the Academy, galvanising the difficulty of thinking in the wake of disaster, without generating any fantasy of mending the world – even less of mending the 'two worlds'. According to this account, Plato is as 'realistic' about power, violence and domination as Thucydides; and Thucydides' history serves as ethical an impulse as Plato's philosophy. Ethics and metaphysics are torn halves of an integral freedom to which they have *never* added up.

It is this classical reflection on the analogies between the soul, the city and the sacred, that I try in this work to renew and reinvent for our time, call it 'modernity' or 'post-modernity'. Of course, taken aporetically, that renewal is what I would argue most post-Kantian thinkers have aimed to develop. Here I include Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche equally with the sociological canon of Marx, Durkheim and Weber as analysts and dramatists of the capitalist and modern world. The sociologists, too, have railed against metaphysics while, in the name of scientific method, they have launched a new ethical endeavour in their sea of troubles and of difficulty.

The reflections to be developed here on the soul, the city and the

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sacred do not begin with a prerogative claim based on the suppression of 'the other', which installs repetitive dualisms of power and otherness within the protest against power. Here it takes three to make a relationship between two: the devastation between posited thought and posited being, between power and exclusion from power, implies the universal, the third partner, which allows us to recognise that devastation. The aporia or gap is the Janus-face of the universal. Together, universal and aporia are irruption and witness to the brokenness in the middle. This ethical witness, universal and aporetic, can only act with some dynamic and corrigible metaphysics of universal and singular, or archetype and type, or concept and intuition. The use of 'analogy' between the soul, the city and the sacred implies that the logic of these relationships has not been prejudged. The 'ana' expresses the gap, while the 'logy', the logos, makes it possible to speak, to propose to raise the difficulty of knowing or not knowing the relation between the three. 'The soul' suspends the modern philosophical command and intensity of 'subjectivity' while stressing the psychological and spiritual entity pervaded by the city and the sacred. 'The soul' is not a prisoner in the body (another travesty of Plato); the body is in the soul. 'The city' like 'the nation-state', implies the bounded political entity, but especially the breaches in its wall. 'The sacred', in its allusion to Marx's dictum, 'All criticism begins with the criticism of religion', picks up the paradox that the ignorance of this reality of the sacred and its ubiquitous reinsinuation now call for an explicit address. If the search for a new ethics divorced from 'metaphysics' to which post-modernism is devoted, has condemned itself to impotence and failure, then the missing resources may be found not in the dogma of truth but in the politics which has been disowned, and in the theology which has been more thoroughly suppressed. It is in the light of this expanding