

My Philosophic Journey

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On this wonderful occasion of being honored I thought that I might review some the highlights of my journey with philosophy—weaving together autobiographical and philosophical remarks. But where to begin? I might begin with growing up in Brooklyn in a supportive second generation immigrant Jewish family. Or I might start with my experience at the University of Chicago where I fell in love with philosophy—especially Plato’s dialogues, *Lysis* and *Phaedrus*. At the age of nineteen I wrote an honors thesis “Love and Friendship in Plat” I first met Dick Rorty at Chicago and we became lifelong friends. In 1953 Dick Rorty encouraged me to join him at the graduate philosophy department at Yale University. I vividly recall my first year of graduate study at Yale. Two events at Yale stand out that shaped my philosophic life. When I started my graduate studies I decided to take a seminar in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I had never read a word of Hegel before that seminar, but I was curious. Initially the experience was traumatic. At first I didn’t understand a word of Hegel and, although my classmates seemed to talk intelligently about Hegel, I really didn’t understand what they were saying. I began to doubt my philosophic ability and almost decided to leave philosophy. I was terrified of making a fool of myself. I spent hours poring over the text, reading and rereading it. My assignment was to report on Hegel’s discussion of the *Antigone*. I had an epiphany. I finally felt that I grasped what Hegel was saying and doing. And from that time until the present Hegel has been a major

influence on my philosophical life. The other significant event was participating in an informal reading group organized by a young faculty member dedicated to a careful reading of John Dewey's *Experience and Nature*. Until then I did not have much interest in Dewey or pragmatism. I shared the prevailing prejudice that pragmatism was a second rate philosophy—not to be taken seriously. But *Experience and Nature* was a revelation. It challenged all my prejudices about pragmatism. I felt an affinity with Dewey and was attracted by his vision of radical democracy. I was deeply inspired by Dewey democratic faith—his vision of democracy as a way of life exhibited in our everyday practices in which all share and participate. I have always loved what Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote about *Experience and Nature*. Writing to a friend he said: “Although Dewey’s book is incredibly ill written it seemed to me . . . to have a feeling of intimacy with the universe that I found unequaled. So methought God would have spoken had He been inarticulate but keenly desirous to tell you how it was.” So I decided to write my dissertation on John Dewey’s metaphysics of experience at a time interest in Dewey and pragmatism was at an all-time low among academic philosophers. I felt then –and still feel—that the classical pragmatists--- Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead—were not passé but actually ahead of their times. And I believed that someday the philosophic world would catch up to them—as it has. These two events—my discovery of Hegel and my decision to write a dissertation Dewey are not unrelated. Dewey started his philosophic career as a Hegelian. I don’t think one can gain a deep understanding of Dewey unless one appreciates the influence of Hegel on his thinking and his gradual move from Hegel to Darwin. This is especially evident in his concept of experience as a dynamic interaction between organisms and environment, which is a naturalized version of Hegel’s concept of *Erfahrung*. Many of my early articles dealt with the classical pragmatists. I never published my

dissertation but my first book dealt with an overview of John Dewey's philosophy. I started teaching at Yale when I was 22 (more than sixty years ago). I always have—and I still do love teaching. I spent the next ten years teaching at Yale after a year as a Fulbright scholar at the Hebrew University in Israel. Philosophy has never been merely an academic discipline for me. Like Socrates I have always thought of philosophy as intimately related to how one lives one's life. I was teaching at Yale during the early days of the Civil Rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement. In the summer of 1964, young people—black and white—from all over the country spent the summer in Mississippi working with local blacks to encourage them to register to vote. Until then, blacks had been thoroughly intimidated by white supremacists. As a young faculty member I went to support our students. Some of my most vivid and memorable experiences in working democracy were exemplified by the courage displayed by local blacks who risked their lives to register to vote. Just before I went to Mississippi, three civil rights workers had been brutally murdered by vicious extreme fanatics.

In 1965 I left Yale and joined the faculty of Haverford College, one of the outstanding liberal arts colleges in America. You have to remember that at the time, the Ivy League colleges in the United States such as Yale, Harvard and Princeton were completely male dominated. There were no undergraduate women students and virtually no women faculty. These institutions allowed a few women to enter their graduate programs. Carol, who I had married in 1955, had taken her PHD in English at Yale, but there was no opportunity for women to teach at first rate institutions in New Haven. One of the primary reasons I decided to go to Haverford was because there were many academic institutions in the Philadelphia area where Carol could pursue her academic career. She soon secured a position at the University of Pennsylvania and eventually at Bryn Mawr College, which is considered to be the finest and academically most rigorous

women's college in the United States. Women of Carol's generation who wanted to pursue academic careers and at the same time have families really had to be superwomen. I remember many nights when Carol started preparing her classes after the four children had gone to bed.

At Haverford I wrote *Praxis and Action*, a book that deals with the concepts of action and praxis in four philosophic traditions: Marxism; Existentialism; Pragmatism; and Analytic Philosophy. I also argued that these four movements could be understood as strong reactions to Hegel. One of the reasons I decided to join the Haverford faculty was because it was an institution founded by Quakers—the Society of Friends. The Quakers refused to be intimidated by the hysterical anti-Communism of the McCarthy period in America. They also took a strong stand against the war in Vietnam. Haverford College was an intellectually and politically supportive environment for teaching and research. Despite the political turmoil of the 1960s and the early 1970s, this was also a time when analytic linguistic philosophy was having a growing influence on graduate philosophy. There were several of us, including Dick Rorty, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and myself who felt the “analytic ideology”—the conviction that analytic linguistic philosophy was the only game in town, the only viable way of doing philosophy—was far too constricting. I date my close friendship with Charles Taylor, with whom I share many philosophical and political views from the 1960s. He also recognized the philosophical importance of Hegel for contemporary philosophy and political theory. He also was elaborating a broader philosophical orientation that would take account of the contributions of analytic philosophy but at the same time provide a basis for dealing with the political and social problems of human beings.

1972 was extremely important year in my life. *Praxis and Action* had been published. I met and befriended both Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. When I first read Habermas'

book *Knowledge and Human Interests*, there was a shock of recognition. I felt that I could have written that book—or rather that I would have liked to have written it. Habermas, coming from a Hegelian-Marxist background was moving closer to pragmatism. There is a chapter in his book on the founder of American pragmatism, Charles S. Peirce. My trajectory was from pragmatism to an increasing interest in Hegelian Marxism and the Frankfurt School thinkers. I invited Habermas to give a lecture at Haverford and we immediately recognized our common interests. We have been in discussion now for almost fifty years. We both shared a sense a conviction the open dialogue among equals and free reciprocal communication are required to achieve a genuine democratic society. In *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (1976), I was one of the first to introduce Habermas's thought to an American audience. Like Habermas I also argued that an adequate social and political theory must be empirical, interpretative and critical. Habermas and I share the necessity of a defending a critical perspective that helps to further the emancipation of oppressed people and those who suffer from the abuses of rapacious capitalism.

In the spring of 1972, Hannah Arendt came to Haverford to give a lecture. She gave her now famous and extremely relevant essay “Lying in Politics,” her critical discussion of the Pentagon papers, the classified top secret documents that Daniel Ellsberg made public. They definitively showed how the United States government had been systematically lying to the American people about the Vietnam War. At the time when I met Hannah Arendt, I wasn't really deeply interested or knowledgeable about her work. Indeed, I was highly critical of her interpretations of Hegel and Marx. I still am. She sought me out because she admired *Praxis and Action*. I remember vividly the night we met in April 1972. We met at 8 P.M. and talked—argued—until 2 A.M. As I wrote in one of the books that I dedicated to her, our initial encounter was at once philosophically erotic and agonistic. We felt a deep affinity for each other and

enjoyed arguing with each—a mark of the best of friendships. The first conference on Hannah Arendt’s work was scheduled for later that year in Toronto and she asked if I would participate. I was honored and sat down to read her work carefully. It was a great discovery. Arendt provides one of the most incisive and beautiful descriptions of what the dignity of politics can and should be—and the way in which it exhibits what she calls “public freedom.” Arendt died three years after I met her in December 1975, but each time we were together, we thoroughly enjoyed our discussions. It is almost as if I have been talking and arguing with her ever since that wonderful evening in April 1972—one long continuous conversation. Indeed, my book, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now* will be published later this spring. Arendt’s insights about the darkness of our times and the sources of illumination are more relevant today than when she was alive. She is constantly being quoted, cited and discussed on social media.

In 1976, Habermas spent the fall semester as a visiting professor at Haverford College—and our intellectual friendship grew deeper. We met every week to discuss and debate philosophical issues about rationality and relativism. The 1970s were a time of growing dissident movements throughout Eastern Europe. The former Yugoslavia was the site of a growing anti-Stalinist movement of Marxist humanists. But in the mid-1970s Tito, the Yugoslavian leader decided to crack down on these Marxist humanists. Eight professors from Belgrade University were fired, the journal *Praxis*—the publication of these dissidents—lost its state subsidy and the famous meetings of left thinkers that were held on the island of Korčula were no longer allowed to take place. At the same time a new international university center was founded in Dubrovnik. The Yugoslavia Praxis group approached Habermas and asked him to organize a seminar that would continue the type of discussions that took place among the Yugoslavian Praxis group—and Habermas asked me if I would join him as a co-director. I

jumped at the opportunity because it was consistent with everything that I believed about the continuity of theory and practice—about the practical relevance of philosophical thinking. We also invited members of the Belgrade group who had been dismissed from their university to join our discussions. Ironically it was only in Dubrovnik that the Belgrade eight could give lectures in Yugoslavia. Habermas and I started the Dubrovnik seminar as a gesture of solidarity with our Yugoslavian dissident friends. But it soon grew into a place where leftist intellectuals from all world gathered to meet and talk together. We attracted a remarkable group including Chares Taylor, Dick Rorty Steven Lukes, Anthony Giddens, Alain Touraine, Cornelius Castoriadis, Claus Offe, Albecht Wellmer and many others. What was also impressive about Dubrovnik is the talented younger faculty and graduate students that participated in our meetings including Axel Honneth, Rainer Forst, Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, Carol Gould, Andrew Arato, Jean Cohen Jose Casanova, Gayatri Spivak Judith Butler and many others.—all of whom have become distinguished intellectuals. The meetings at Dubrovnik also had another serendipitous consequence. At the same time that our seminar took place each spring there was also another seminar at the Interuniversity Center dealing with phenomenology and hermeneutics. It is there that I encountered both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. I had read Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and it had a profound influence on me—especially his nuanced understanding of dialogue. In 1983, I published *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*—a book that I dedicated to four friends: Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Rorty. Although there are sharp intellectual differences among thee thinkers, I tried to show how that could be engaged in dialogue with each other.

From the time of my friendship with Hannah Arendt, I had always been interested in the

New School for Social Research. All my philosophic interests were represented at the New School. John Dewey was among the original founders. When The University in Exile was founded as a branch of the New School in 1933, the institution became a haven for many European scholars—especially Jewish intellectuals—who had fled from Nazi Germany. But in the 1970s the New School fell on hard times and there were serious discussions about ending the Graduate Faculty. A new president and dean decided to rebuild the Graduate Faculty. I was asked to join an Enabling Committee that would appoint faculty to rebuild the institution. My first recommendation was the appointment of Agnes Heller, the famous Budapest philosopher. In 1989, Agnes asked if I would join her in rebuilding the New School philosophy department. I served as chair of the philosophy department from 1989 until 2002. I also agreed to serve as Dean of the Graduate Faculty in the early 2000s when the institution was facing another crisis. Just before I joined the faculty of the New School, I met Jacques Derrida. I had tried reading Derrida for many years but I simply could not make much sense of what he was saying. My wife Carol who was interested in literary theory had a great admiration for his work. And since Carol is among the most intelligent persons that I know, I keep reading Derrida to find out what was so important. I had a breakthrough when I read his insightful essay on Emmanuel Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics.” Contrary to many caricatures of Derrida as someone engaging in meaningless deconstructive word play, I felt that there was a serious ethical-political theme in his work. At the heart of his work is a deep concern with human responsibility. I met with Derrida to discuss my understanding of the ethical-political dimension of his thinking. He was delighted to encounter someone who appreciated this aspect of his thinking. In 1988 I had been elected president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. The Eastern Division had been the hard core of analytic philosophy. A number of its prominent members

expressed their extreme disdain for Derrida and ridiculed him. When he gave seminars at Yale University in the comparative literature department, philosophy students at Yale were actively discouraged from participating in his seminars. My deepest philosophic commitments have always been pluralistic. I do not believe that any tradition, school, or orientation has an exclusive access to the truth. I have always felt that one must make the imaginative effort to understand radically different orientations and perspectives.—and to critically engage them. I agree with Gadamer that self-knowledge is achieved in and through the encounter with what is different and radically other. I take this task to be essential on both the intellectual and personal level. As President of the American Philosophical Association, I felt it was time for analytical trained philosophers to get over their intellectual provincialism. I invited Derrida to address the A.P.A. More than a thousand philosophers attended his lecture on the politics of friendship. For the next decade Derrida gave a seminar every fall at the New School. Carol and I invited Derrida to have dinner at our apartment every year when he came to New York. One of the most memorable dinners took place in October 2001, one month after 9/11 when we also invited Habermas to join us. I should also mention that Maria Pia Lara from this university was at that dinner. It was a significant event because it helped to solidify the friendship between Habermas and Derrida. Naturally, we discussed the significance of 9/11. On the basis of our discussions Habermas and Derrida agreed to publish joint interviews with Giovanna Borradori in the book *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. I can't help mentioning one humorous incident about Derrida. On one occasion when we were scheduled to have dinner with Derrida, my daughter Andrea (who is here today) urgently needed someone to take care of her daughter because she had an important appointment. She called Carol to ask her help on the very night that Derrida was coming to dinner. When Carol informed me she couldn't do it, Andrea said that she was probably the only daughter in

world whose mother's excuse for not helping was that she was having dinner with Jacques Derrida.

From 1989 until the present I have been teaching and writing at the New School in a department with lively colleagues and students. Writing for me has always been a source of discovery. There are some thinkers who have a single project which they spend their life working on. I have great admiration for such thinkers. But that is not my style. I believe that there is coherence and consistency in my philosophical work, but my primary motivation has always been intellectual curiosity. Like Hannah Arendt I want to understand the world around me—and like Socrates, I increasingly become aware of my ignorance. The diversity of my interests is reflected in the books that I have written since joining the New School faculty. They include: *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*; *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*; *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*; *Radical Evil*; *The Abuse of Evil: The Pragmatic Turn, and Ironic Life*. I want to say a few words about why I have written on evil and violence. I am a pragmatic realist. I believe that one has the task to try to understand and *resist* the violence and evil that confronts us in our everyday lives. In my book on violence I wrote the following:

We live in a time of violence. Whether on television the internet, smartphones films or the video screen, we can't escape representations of actual or fictional violence—so much so that we easily become numb and indifferent to still another report or depiction of violence—another suicide bombing, another assassination or violent rebellion in some remote part of the world, another report of domestic violence another action movie or video game filled with all sorts of violence. The media typically have a field day when some deranged person unexpectedly starts killing in a high school,

university, or movie theater. But after a few days of 24/7 reporting, these incidents pass into oblivion. Even a momentous event like 9/11 does not provoke much public *thinking* about violence. Our age may well be called “The Age of Violence” because representations of real or imagined violence (sometimes blurred and fused together) are inescapable. But the surfeit of images and talk of violence dulls and even inhibits thinking. What do we mean by violence? How are we to characterize the different types of violence, and how are they related to each other? What does violence achieve? Is there a type of creative violence that enhances life? What are the limits of violence? How is violence related to nonviolence (Bernstein 2013: viii).

I do not claim to have definitive answers to these and related questions. I don’t think there are or can be definitive answers. But I certainly do believe that we have to continue *think* and *rethink* the meaning of violence and evil today. And I hope that my modest contributions to dealing with these complex and tangled issues help to further our understanding of the world and how we might *resist* the worst forms of violence and evil.

Fortuna, the goddess of luck, chance and contingency plays a significant role in the writings of the great Italian thinker, Machiavelli. We all know that luck is fickle—we can have good and bad luck. Looking back on my life and career I am grateful that it has been filled with good luck. I have been blessed by the goddess *Fortuna*. I have a magnificent wife who has been a loving companion for more than sixty years. I have been blessed by my talented children and their spouses--all of whom are leading interesting lives. And I have been blessed by six magnificent creative and socially concerned grandchildren. Professionally, I have been extremely lucky to have worked in stimulating institutions and environments where I could follow my curiosity and intellectual interests—wherever they might live. And I have enjoyed friendships

with thinkers that I deeply admire and respect, including Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida. Carol and I were first invited to give lectures in Mexico City in 1980s and we have returned many times since then. We have always been warmly received with the generous Mexican hospitality. We count many Mexicans among our most cherished friends. A life worth living –as Aristotle taught us---is one that involves friendship—friends with whom one can converse, argue and share meaningful experiences.

If one really does believe in ineradicable contingency as I do, then one knows how fragile life is and how things can suddenly take a turn for the worse. John Dewey wrote that “the *world* is precarious and perilous.” There are no metaphysical guarantees that the goods we cherish--whether individual social or political will persist and prevail. Thus the pragmatic imperative is to work hard to ameliorate human misery and suffering. Hannah Arendt entitled one of her books, *Men in Dark Times* When she spoke of “dark times” she was not exclusively referring to the horrors of totalitarianism in the twentieth century.

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a spaces of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better or worse who they are and what they can do then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by “credibility gaps” and “invisible government” by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet by exhortations, moral and otherwise that under the pretext of upholding old truths degrade all truth to meaningless triviality.

This might have been written yesterday about the current administration in the United States—especially her claim about how under the pretext of upholding old truths one is degrading all

truth into meaningless triviality. Given this characterization of “dark times” I think that we are now living through one of the darkest times of my entire life. It is not just in the United States but through the world there is a growth of new invidious forms of authoritarianism, xenophobia, and ugly blatant racism—a retrenchment from democratic public freedom. There is a danger of increasing cynicism and despair where people want to retreat to cultivate their own private gardens—to make their own fortunes and satiate their own desires. We no longer publically speak of a common good and a shared responsibility for those who are oppressed and exploited. It is ominous when our political leaders consistently lie and seek to obliterate any meaningful distinction between truth and falsehood. When speaking of dark times, Arendt went on to say “that even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination and such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth” Like Arendt, I also believe that in the darkest of times, it is essential to keep alive the illumination by provided by persons (past and present) who resist deceit, lying, violence, evil, and darkness – those who refuse to accept the world as it is and continue fight social injustice and to alleviate the many forms of human misery. There is no escape from peril and from contingency. Reckless optimism and reckless despair are to be rejected. This doesn’t mean that one abandons hope. But hope is not about the future, it is about the present. I would like to conclude with one of my favorite quotations that epitomizes the meaning of pragmatic hope.

Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. . . . The worst is always what the hopeful are prepared for. Their trust in life would not be worth much if it had not survived disappointments in the past, while knowledge that the future

holds further disappointments demonstrates the continuing need for hope . . .

Improvvidence, a blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best, furnishes a poor substitute for the disposition to see things through when they don't [work out].

That is what pragmatic hope is all about—to see things through when even when one's ideals are frustrated. We cannot—we should not—turn our faces away from the darkness and extreme violence of our times. We must honestly confront it in all its horrible ugliness. But as the same time we must not escape into cynicism, despair of indifference. Rather we ought to commit ourselves to fight against social injustice—even when we fail. As I look back on my life and forward to future, I think that this commitment has been as the center—the core—of everything I have written, said, and done.