Response to Udo Tietz:

Toward the middle of his paper, Udo Tietz narrows down the issue he wishes to discuss as follows: “Es geht einzig und allein um der Frage, ob sich der ‘logische Raum des Begruendens’ partikularistisch durch das Ethnos begenzen läst und damit um dier Frage nach der der Rechtfertigung unserer Ueberzeugungen, die nach Rorty in den engen Grenzen particularer Wir-Gesmeinschaft einen Sinn machen.” It seems to me that Tietz here runs together the question:

1. Do we and the Nazis share the same logical space?
2. Do we have enough common beliefs and desires so that we can justify our beliefs to one another?

I would think that Tietz and I could agree that the answer to (1) is “yes”, and the answer to (2) is “no”. But a negative answer to the latter question does not mean that our justifications of our un-Nazi convictions “keinen Sinn machen” to the Nazis. They make sense to them; they just don’t persuade them. As Tietz says, when I talk about failure to be able to justify I am talking about a practical problem: de facto inability to change minds, not inability to give unconvincing, albeit intelligible, reasons.

The answer to (1) is “yes” because we and the Nazis have a clear understanding of where we differ, of why we are unlikely ever to agree, and thus of why we shall have to resort to force rather than persuasion in our dealings with one another. As Tietz puts it, “nur was wir verstehen, vermoegen wir naemlich zu beurteilen”. We and the Nazis both understand what the problem is. Everything everybody else says makes sense to everybody else.

I quite agree with Tietz that the holistic character of attribution of intentional states forbids the particularization of the logical space of giving and asking for reasons. Although Davidson is right to say that the moral of his holism is not that we all share the same conceptual scheme, there is a difference between a conceptual scheme and a logical space. There is, indeed, only one logical space. But this universalism of logical space is not the universalism that philosophers like Plato, Kant, Apel and Habermas are urging.

Theirs is the sort of universalism which allows them to say “If you only thought through what both you and I believe, you would see that I am justified and you are not [or that you are “irrational” and we are not].” This is the sort of claim one finds most explicitly among Kantian moral philosophers like Christine Korsgaard, who thinks that if the Nazi thinks hard enough he will find within himself the premises he needs to be converted to anti-Nazism. A similar claim is made when Apel argues that Nazis are guilty of self-referential inconsistency.

It is only this sort of claim that my ethnocentrism targets. If you think such claims not worth discussing, then you will find my ethnocentrism trivial
and pointless. Everybody except children and psychotics can justify their beliefs to every other inhabitant of the one logical space. But “justify” is ambiguous between “giving the sort of reasons that convince most people in our Wir-Gemeinschaft” and “giving the sort of reasons that would convince all inhabitants of logical space.” Korsgaard and Apel think there are reasons of the latter sort which will help us resolve moral and political conflicts (as opposed, for example, to conflicts about arithmetical results or whether it is raining). My denial that there are any such reasons is all that my ethnocentric particularism amounts to.

Tietz raises a good question when he says that I am persistently vague about what sets one “Wir” off from another. I think he is right to criticize me on this point. As a first attempt to do better, let me try the following: we are, for purposes of discussing Jews thought not for purposes of discussing arithmetic”, a different “Wir” from the Nazis. This is because we would rather die than kill innocent Jewish children and they (let us say—taking the extreme case) would rather die than betray the Fuehrer by not killing them. We have what Korsgaard calls a “different practical identity” than they do; we could not spin a coherent narrative about ourselves if we did what they do, and conversely.

Something like this may work though not so perspcuously, for us and an Amazonain tribe living in the Stone Age. Anthropologists and others who beg us not to destroy the cultures, and thus the self-identity, of members of such tribes. One can see their point; cultural change of that magnitude is a little like death, and forcibly bringing it about seems almost as cruel as killing. It is not exactly that the Amazonians would rather die than give up their Stone Age cosmology, but rather that they would not be able to tell a coherent story about how they changed their minds and were persuaded to abandon it.

“Bekehrt” seems the right word for what happens to them when the modern world charges into their villages, rather than “ueberzeugt”—just as it seems the right word for what happens to the Nazi who suddenly can’t bring himself to kill any more Jewish children. The similarity between the two cases is that, as Tietz says, “Bekehrungen von oder zu ihrem Standpukt keine Folgerungen aus gemeinsam geteilten Praemissen darstellen”. This way of putting is seems a good explication of what Williams had in mind when he says that two Wir-gemeinschaften may not be able to offer each other “wirkliche Alternative”. The boundaries between such communities are set by an ability to change while still keeping a sense of identity.

“Sense of identity” is, I admit, a pretty fuzzy notion, but I do not think I can make the notion of “Wir-gemeinschaft” any less fuzzy than that.

I agree with Tietz’s italicized claim that “Durch so viele verneuerte Ueberzeugungen wuerde einfach der Bezuspunkt unsharf werden, vor dem sich diese Ueberzeugungen nach identifizieren liessen.” But though this may be a problem when translating Amazonain cosmological
discourse, it is not much of a problem in the case of the Nazis. Their crazy beliefs are surrounded by a lot of highly rational beliefs about how to invade other countries, how to eliminate Jews found there, and so on—beliefs that we identify easily. Tietz is quite right that I would maintain that only the mostly sane can be said to hold crazy beliefs. Analogously, only the living—people most of whose organs are still functioning—can be said to be sick. Once too many of your beliefs are crazy, it becomes unclear whether you still have any beliefs at all.)

I agree with Tietz’s point that the disagreement between us and the Nazis is “bloss politisch” in a sense analogous to that in which the disagreement between Spinozists and Sartreans is “bloss philosophisch”. I take it that he thinks this is not enough of a difference to permit talk of different ethnoi, and perhaps he is right.

Maybe my choice of “ethnocentrism” was a bad one, but I am not sure. I used this term for the first time in a paper called “Solidarity and Objectivity”, which began by saying that Plato invented philosophy when he suggested that an ability to reason together, to communicate, insured that all cultural and political differences could be overcome by a recourse to shared premises—the premises provided by our shared memories of The Idea of the Good, for example. So I formulated my own anti-Platonic view as the claim that ethnocentrism—the differences about what constitutes a good human life that divided the Persians from the Hellenes, for example—was not necessarily resolvable by any such appeal. My point was that Plato shares with contemporary thinkers like Apel and Korsgaard (and Putnam, at least in certain of Putnam’s writings) the belief that shared rationality in the sense of shared ability to communicate is sufficient to produce agreement on what a decent human being should rather die than do.

That latter belief is, as I said above, my only target. But since it is a belief that is still very prevalent, not only among philosophy professors but among beginning students of philosophy, I think that it is important to criticize it. But I would happily abandon the term “ethnocentrism” if I could find some other way of making vivid my (utterly unoriginal) claim that being rational has nothing much to do with being a decent human being.