

**UNIVERSALIST GRANDEUR, ROMANTIC PROFUNDITY, HUMANIST
FINITUDE**

Philosophy becomes important to culture only when things seem to be falling apart—when long-held and widely-cherished beliefs are threatened. At such periods, intellectuals step forward who reinterpret the past in terms of an imagined future, offering suggestions about what can be preserved and what has to be discarded. Intellectuals who are particularly good at doing this have their names added to the list of “great philosophers”. When Greek piety began to decay, and prayer and priestcraft began to be viewed with suspicion, Plato and Aristotle found ways of holding on to the idea that human beings, unlike the beasts that perish, had a special relation to the ruling powers of the universe. When Copernicus and Galileo once again put all in doubt, figures like Spinoza and Kant taught how to replace love of God with love of Truth, and how to replace obedience to the divine will with moral purity. When the democratic revolutions and industrialization made it necessary to reconceive the nature of the social bond, Marx and Mill had some useful suggestions to offer.

In the course of the twentieth century, however, there were no crises of the sort that dominated the intellectual life of the West between 1650 and 1900. There was no intellectual struggle comparable to the one that Lecky famously described as the warfare between science and theology. Nor were there any social convulsions that rendered either Mill or Marx irrelevant. As

high culture became increasingly secularized, the educated classes of Europe and the Americas became complacently materialist in their understanding of how things work. In the battle between Plato and Democritus—the one Plato described as between the gods and the giants—they have come down, once and for all, on the side of the giants. They have become complacently utilitarian and experimentalist in their judgments of proposed social and political initiatives. They share the same utopian vision: a just global society in which human rights are respected and equality of opportunity is insured. Political argument is simply about the best means of attaining this goal.

This consensus among the intellectuals has moved philosophy to the margins of high culture. The controversies between Russell and Bergson, Heidegger and Cassirer, Carnap and Quine, Ayer and Austin, Habermas and Gadamer, and Fodor and Davidson, have had no resonance outside the borders of philosophy departments. Philosophers' explanations of how the mind is related to the brain, or how there can be a place for value in a world of fact, or how free will and mechanism can be reconciled, do not intrigue most contemporary intellectuals. Such problems, preserved in amber as textbook "problems of philosophy", still capture the imagination of some bright students. But no one would claim that discussion of them is central to intellectual life. Solving those very problems was all-important for contemporaries of Spinoza, but when we philosophy professors insist that that they are "perennial" or remain "fundamental" nobody takes us seriously. Most intellectuals of our day brush aside the claim that our social

practices require philosophical foundations with the same impatience as when a similar claim is made for religion.

But even though the struggle between the gods and the giants has is over, two other controversies that Plato described are still alive. One is the quarrel between philosophy and poetry—a quarrel that was revitalized by the Romantic Movement, and has taken the form of tension between what C P. Snow called “the scientific culture” and “the literary culture”. This quarrel is about whether human beings are at their best—realize their special powers to the fullest--when they strive for objectivity and use reason in order to discover how things are in themselves, or rather when they use their imaginations to kindle a more intense subjectivity and to create new human needs. The other is the quarrel that Plato described as between the philosophers and the sophists. This is between those who think there is an important intellectual virtue called “the love of truth” and those who do not.

The standoff between Nietzsche and Plato that dominates a great deal of recent philosophical writing epitomizes both quarrels. That opposition, unlike any of the more parochial ones that I listed earlier, is still capable of gripping the imagination of intellectuals who are common-sensical materialists and utilitarians. It would, however, be too much to say that this opposition is at the center of contemporary intellectual life. No philosophical issue has occupied that position for the last hundred years. But it is not too much to say that the best way for us philosophy professors to get the attention of people outside our own discipline is to raise the question of whether Plato was right that humans beings can transcend contingency by

searching for truth or whether Nietzsche was right to treat both Platonism and religion as escapist fantasies.

The quarrel that the philosophers have with the poets is not the same as their quarrel with the sophists, for reasons that I shall come to shortly. But the poets and the sophists have a lot in common—especially their shared doubts about the claim of natural science to offer objective truth about how things really are, and the idea that science should serve as a model for the rest of culture. Both are suspicious of what I shall call “universalistic grandeur”—the sort of grandeur attained by mathematics and mathematical physics.

Both numbers and elementary particles display the imperturbability traditionally attributed to the divine. The study of both produces structures of great beauty, structures that are godlike in their self-sufficient independence of human concerns. The same impulse that led Plato to think that what he called “the really real” must be more like a number than like a lump of dirt has led many recent philosophers to take modern physical science as the over-arching framework within which philosophical inquiry is to be conducted. Thus we find Quine identifying the question “is there a fact of the matter?” with the question “does it make a difference to the elementary particles”, and Davidson suggesting that the particles are the only true locus of causality, since they are the only entities whose behavior is regulated by “strict, exceptionless laws”. A host of philosophers have devoted themselves to “naturalizing epistemology” and “naturalizing semantics”. These are attempts to describe mind and language in terms which chime with the fact

that every fact about what is thought and what is meant supervenes upon facts about particles. Whereas intellectuals in general are happy to agree that physics tells you how things work, many contemporary philosophers are still Platonist enough to think that it does more than that—that it tells you what is really real.

The battle that many philosophers of this sort wage against those whom they think of as contemporary sophists—the people whom they describe as “relativists” or “irrationalists” or “deniers of truth”—is often described as a defense of science against its enemies. Many of these philosophers think of science as pre-Galilean intellectuals thought of religion—as the area of culture in which human beings are at their best, because most willing to open themselves to what transcends the merely human. Hostility to science is, in their view, a form of spiritual degradation. Thus Bertrand Russell, at the beginning of the last century, reacted against the line of thought that William James called “pragmatism” and that his Oxford friend F. C. S. Schiller called “humanism”, by writing as follows:

...greatness of soul is not fostered by those philosophies which assimilate the universe to Man. Knowledge is a form of union of Self and not-Self; like all union, it is impaired by domination,, and therefore by any attempt to force the universe into conformity with what we find in ourselves. There is a widespread philosophical tendency towards the view which tells us that Man is the measure of all things, that truth is man-made....This view...is untrue; but in addition to being untrue, it has the effect of robbing philosophic contemplation of all that gives it

value...The free intellect will see as God might see, without a here and now, without hopes and fears...calmly, dispassionately, in the sole and exclusive desire of knowledge—knowledge as impersonal, as purely contemplative, as it is possible for man to attain.

Thomas Nagel shares Russell's contempt for those who believe that, as William James put it, "the trail of the human serpent is over all". Nagel describes what he calls "the outermost framework of all thoughts" as "a conception of what is objectively the case—what is the case without subjective or relative qualification". (LW, 16) In response to pragmatists and historicists who argue that all justification is by our lights—the lights of a particular time and place—Nagel replies that

claims to the effect that a type of judgment expresses a local point of view are inherently objective in intent. They suggest a picture of the true sources of those judgments that places them in an unconditional context. The judgment of relativity or conditionality cannot be applied to the judgment of relativity itself...There may be some subjectivists, perhaps calling themselves pragmatists, who present subjectivism as applying even to itself. But then what they say does not call for a reply, since it is just a report of what the subjectivist finds it agreeable to say. (LW, 14-15)

Russell and Nagel share Plato's taste for universalist grandeur and his conviction that there is, in the end, no middle way between the attempt to reach an outermost framework that is the inescapable, unconditional context of thought and simply saying whatever you find agreeable to say. Like Plato,

they see nothing in between sharing the aspiration for the universal that sets attempt to attain the universal, the aspiration that sets humans apart from the brutes, and losing self-control by giving free rein to our unjustifiable, idiosyncratic desires. So the pragmatist suggestion that mathematics and physics be thought of as devices for the improvement of man's estate--the best way to cope with our environment that we have come up with so far--strikes both Russell and Nagel as a symptom of moral weakness as well as of intellectual error.

In the past, I have attempted to defend James' resistance to Russell's neo-Platonism, and to reinforce the defense of Protagoras mounted by Schiller, by aligning pragmatism with romanticism. In particular, I have tried to firm up the alliance between the sophists and the poets against the philosophers by emphasizing the debt that both Dewey and Nietzsche owed to Emerson. But I have latterly come to think it better to distinguish more sharply between the romantics, who tend to buy in on the Platonic reason-passion distinction and then exalt passion at the expense of reason, and the pragmatists, who want to brush aside both the reason-passion and the objective-subjective distinctions. So in this lecture I am going to stress the contrast between the two quarrels I have been discussing: the one between philosophy and poetry and that between neo-Platonists such as Russell and Nagel and neo-sophists like myself.

To bring out the difference, I shall invoke two distinctions that Juergen Habermas drew in his book THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY. These are distinctions I have found invaluable in thinking about

how best to tell the story of modern Western philosophy. The first is the one Habermas makes between what he calls “subject-centered reason” and “communicative reason”. Subject-centered reason is a Platonic invention: it consists in a purported connaturality between the mind of each human being and the nature of things. Plato described this connaturality in terms of the soul’s pre-existence in an immaterial world. Descartes, Russell and Nagel presuppose such connaturality when they say that all we have to do to reach a transcultural and ahistorical outermost framework of thought is to substitute conceptual clarity for conceptual confusion.

What Habermas calls “communicative rationality”, by contrast, is not a natural endowment, but a set of social practices. It is found wherever people are willing to hear the other side, to talk things over, to argue until areas of agreement are found, and to abide by the resulting agreements. To think of reason as subject-centered is to believe that human beings possess a faculty that enables them to circumvent conversation—to side-step opinion and head straight for knowledge. To abandon this conception of rationality is to see truth as what emerges as a result of a free and imaginative search for consensus, and to think of knowledge as the presence of such consensus rather than as a mental state that enjoys a different relation to reality than does opinion.

To agree with Habermas that reason is communicative and dialogical rather than subject-centered and monological is to substitute responsibility to other human beings for responsibility to a non-human standard. It is to lower our horizons from the unconditional above us to the community around

us. This substitution enables us to accept with equanimity Kuhn's suggestion scientists solve problems rather than disclose the true nature of things. It helps us hope for small, finite, transitory successes rather than participation in enduring grandeur.

So much for Habermas' first distinction. His second distinction is between the kind of philosopher who remains loyal to rationality and the kind who celebrates what Habermas calls "an other to reason". Habermas uses the latter term to characterize such things as mystic insight, poetic inspiration, religious faith, imaginative power, and authentic self-expression—sources of conviction that philosophers have been put forward as superior to reason. Like Descartes' clear and distinct ideas, each of these others to reason is put forward as a short cut to truth.

If you are in touch with such an other, you do not need to converse with other human beings. If you possess something like what Kierkegaard called "faith", or if you can engage in something like what Heidegger called "Denken", it will not matter to you whether other people can be persuaded to share your beliefs. It would debase the relevant "other to reason" to force into the conversational arena, making it compete in the market-place of ideas.

Habermas has sometimes suggested that I go too far when I deny that universal validity is a goal of inquiry. He thinks of my repudiation of this goal as an unfortunate concession to romanticism, and as putting me in bad company—Heidegger's, for example. But I regard Habermas' willingness to retain this goal as an unfortunate concession to Platonism. By hanging on to

it, it seems to me, Habermas remains in thrall to the philosophical tradition that burdened us with a subject-centered conception of reason.

Carrying through on Habermas' project of replacing a subject-centered conception of reason with a communicative conception would leave one without any use for the notion of universal validity. For doing so leaves one thinking of rational inquiry as having no higher goal than solving the transitory problems of the day. So I should like to think of my quasi-Deweyan version of pragmatism as standing to communicative reason as universalism stands to subject-centered reason, and as romanticism stands to the various others to reason. Habermas and I both distrust metaphysics. But I think that getting rid of metaphysics also gets rid of the idea of universal validity, whereas he thinks that notion must be given a metaphysics-free interpretation if we are to avoid the seductions of romanticism.

One way to express our disagreement is to say that I cast Habermas in the role in which he casts Hegel—as someone who almost reaches the correct philosophical position but fails to take the last crucial step. One of the central points Habermas makes in *THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY* is that Hegel almost, but not quite, broke free of Plato and Descartes. He almost broke the hold of subject-centered conceptions of rationality, He came very close to replacing it, once and for all, with what Terry Pinkard has called “the doctrine of the sociality of reason”. That doctrine holds that an individual human being cannot be rational all by herself, for the same reasons that she cannot use language all by herself. For unless and until we take part in what

Robert Brandom calls “the game of giving and asking for reasons”, we remain unthinking brutes.

Habermas thinks that if Hegel had managed to carry through on this Wittgensteinian line of thought we might have been spared the aggressive post-Hegelian anti-rationalisms of Kierkegaard, Bergson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault and others. But for Hegel to have taken the plunge he would have had to drop the idea of absolute knowledge. He would have had to turn his back on Parmenides, Plato, and the quest for grandeur--- a kind of grandeur that becomes possible only when doubt is eliminated, when no participant in the conversation has anything left to say, and when history—and perhaps time as well—can come to an end. To do that, Hegel would have had to give up the identification of the divine and the human at which his System aimed. He would have had to rest content with the thought the idea that the conversation of humankind would go its unpredictable way for as long as our species lasts--solving particular problems as they happen to arise, and, by working through the consequences of those solutions, generating new problems.

One way to follow up on Habermas’ criticism of Hegel is to think of Hegel as having taken on the impossible task of reconciling the romantic idea that the human future might become unimaginably different, and unimaginably richer, than the human past, with the Greek idea that time, history and diversity are distractions from an eternal oneness. As with Goethe, much of Hegel’s greatness lies in his having heightened the tensions between the temporal and the eternal, and between the classic and the

romantic, rather than in his success at dissolving either opposition. It is as if the cunning of reason used Hegel to heighten our sense of this tension, and thus to warn us that we should cease to attempt such syntheses.

John Dewey, the greatest of the Left Hegelians, heeded this warning. Dewey had no use either for theodicy or for the ideal of absolute knowledge. He was interested only in helping people solve problems, and had no ambitions to either grandeur or profundity. Abandoning both of these projects has resulted in his being dismissed as a bourgeois bore. Both Platonists and Nietzscheans regard Dewey as incapable of rising to the spiritual level on which philosophy should be pursued.

So far I have been treated romanticism simply as one example of the invocation of what Habermas calls “an other to reason”. Now I should like to say something more detailed about it. Doing so will clarify why I think that philosophy should cease to rise to the spiritual level at which Plato and Nietzsche confront one another. I shall argue that philosophers should drop metaphors of level—both metaphors of height and metaphors of depth--once and for all. By doing so, philosophy could bourgeoisify and finitize itself. That seems to me a desirable goal.

One of Dewey's most trenchant critics, Arthur Lovejoy, was also a distinguished historian of ideas. In the latter capacity, he urged that it was time to put aside the hackneyed opposition between classicism and romanticism—to treat it as an overused, worn out, historiographical device. In a celebrated essay, Lovejoy cited a whole series of ideas and intellectual movements that had been labeled “romanticism”, and showed not only that

nothing bound them together, but that some of them stood in direct opposition to one another.

Isaiah Berlin is one of the few historians of ideas who have had the courage to insist that Lovejoy was “in this instance mistaken”. “There was a romantic movement,” Berlin says, “it did have something that was central to it; it did create a great revolution in consciousness, and it is important to discover what this is”. (RR, 20) Berlin revivifies the notion of romanticism by opposing it not to classicism but to universalism. He thereby transforms it into one term of a philosophical, rather than a literary, contrast. He calls universalism the “backbone of the main Western tradition”, and says that it was that backbone that romanticism “cracked”. (RR, 21) Romanticism, Berlin says, was “the deepest and most long lasting of all changes in the life of the West.” (RR, xiii).

Prior to the late eighteenth century, Berlin claims, Western thinkers were pretty much agreed on three doctrines: First, all genuine questions can be answered. Second, all these answers can be discovered by public means-- means which, as Berlin says, “can be learnt and taught to other persons”. Third, all these answers are compatible with one another. They all fit together into One Truth. As Berlin nicely puts it, Western thinkers viewed human life as the attempt to solve a jigsaw puzzle. He describes what I have called their obsession with universalist grandeur as follows:

There must be some way of putting the pieces together. The all-wise being, the omniscient being, whether God or an omniscient earthly creature—whichever way you like to conceive of it—is in principle

capable of fitting all the pieces together into one coherent pattern. Anyone who does this will know what the world is like: what things are, what they have been, what they will be, what the laws are that govern them, what man is, what the relation of man is to things, and therefore what man needs, what he desires, and how to obtain it. (RR, 23)

Berlin's own philosophical writings are built around his conviction that the pieces will not, in fact, fit together. The theme of his best-known essay, "Two concepts of liberty", is that some goods are incompatible with one another. No matter what socio-political setup we agree on, something will be lost. Somebody will get hurt. Some people will suffer. This is a view with which Dewey would have entirely agreed.

As Berlin tells the story, the French Revolution forced us to face up to incompatibility. The unity of Truth cannot be reconciled with the fact that "Danton...a sincere revolutionary who committed certain errors, did not deserve to die, and yet Robespierre was perfectly right to put him to death." (RR13) The romantic reaction to this paradox, Berlin says, was to attach the highest importance to such values as "integrity, sincerity, readiness to sacrifice one's life to some inner light, dedication to some ideal for which it is worth both living and dying." (RR, 8) Seen from a Platonist point of view, this amounted to giving passion supremacy over rationality, authenticity over conversability.

Berlin sums up the romantic reaction against the assumption that there is always one right answer to the question "what is to be done?" by saying

that what Hegel called “the collision of good with good” is “due not to error, but to some kind of conflict of an unavoidable kind, of loose elements wandering about the earth, of values which cannot be reconciled. What matters is that people should dedicate themselves to these values with all that is in them.” (RR, 13)

Pragmatism differs from romanticism in taking seriously the collision of good with good while remaining dubious of the idea of total commitment. The idea that all collisions of good with good are merely apparent, that apparent moral dilemmas are illusory, and that everything will someday be seen as fitting together was Plato’s bequest to orthodox monotheistic theology. It became the charter not just of theodicy but of what Heidegger calls “the onto-theological tradition”—the tradition to which Russell and Nagel both belong, and with which Berlin and Dewey were both trying to break. That tradition has always insisted that there is more to the search for truth than merely finding acceptable compromises. But from the pragmatist point of view, anomalies are not a matter of appearance obscuring reality but of a set of beliefs developed to serve one good purpose interfering with another set developed to serve another good purpose. So they see inquiry not as aiming at universalist grandeur and finality but as reconciling one project with another project. Since truth is, as James said, what is good in the way of belief, to admit that there will always be collisions of good with good is to admit that such grandeur will never be attained.

The Theory of Forms gave Plato a way to see two goods that might seem to collide—the attainment of certainty and of erotic gratification—as

compatible. The author of both love poems and mathematical proofs, he wanted to see both as serving a single purpose. If we put the Phaedrus together with the Republic, we can see Plato as trying to fit his attraction to the young men to whom he dedicated his poems, his love for Socrates, and his hopes for a just city, together with his passion for demonstrative certainty. By, as Nietzsche put it, insisting that only the rational can be beautiful, and by identifying beauty with reality, he enabled us to see the ugly collision of good with good as mere appearance.

On Berlin's account, the imperturbable grandeur of the new and radiant world that Plato claimed to have discerned dominated the imagination of the West up until the romantic movement. Thanks to the thinkers of philosophy's heroic age, such as Spinoza and Kant, the ideal of universalist grandeur was able to survive the secularization of high culture. For these philosophers suggested ways of keeping the jig saw puzzle view alive even after we had become Democriteans in our understanding of those things work. They showed us how the One Truth could remain what Plato had taught us it was—both an appropriate object of erotic striving and an invulnerable ally.

The romantic movement did its best to break apart what Plato thought he had fitted together. It mocked Plato's attempt to bring the mathematically certain and the poetically sublime together. It denied the claim made in Plato's Phaedrus that the particular person or city or idea or book one loves with all one's heart and soul and mind is simply a temporary disguise adopted

by something eternal and infinite, something not itself subject to contingency or defeat. To quote Berlin again:

What romanticism did was to undermine the notion that in matters of value, politics, morals, aesthetics there are such things as objective criteria which operate between human beings, such that anyone who does not use these criteria is simply either a liar or a madman, which is true of mathematics and physics. (RR, 140)

That is to undermine an assumption common to Plato, Kant, and Habermas: that there is such a thing as “the better argument”—better not by reference to its ability to convince some particular audience, but because it better tracks universal validity. The idea that there is one right thing to do or to believe, no matter who you are, and the idea that arguments have intrinsic goodness or badness, no matter who is asked to evaluate them, go hand in hand. Both ideas are epitomized in the Kant’s pairing of universal and necessary truths built into the structure of the human mind with unconditional moral obligations. My basic disagreement with Habermas is over his attempt to combine a Kant-style notion of the intrinsically better argument with a Hegel-style doctrine of the sociality of reason.

If we follow Berlin in abandoning the jigsaw puzzle view, we shall no longer be tempted by the idea that inquiry aims at something grander than problem-solving. But Berlin, like Dewey, recognized that the Platonic attempt to fuse grandeur and invulnerability had unfortunately survived within the bosom of romanticism. The idea that linked the romantics with the onto-

theological tradition was that of “the infinite”, an ambiguous term that universalists and romantics use in different ways.

Universalism’s idea of the infinite is of something that encompasses everything else, and thus something against which nothing has any power. To say that God is infinite is to say that nothing outside him can affect him, much less deter him from his purposes. Romanticism’s idea of infinity is closer to the one Kierkegaard invokes when he speaks of the passion of the infinite. It is an essentially reactive idea, the idea of removing all constraints, and in particular all the limitations imposed by the human past, all those which are built into the way we currently talk and think. The romantic idea of infinity has more to do with the figure of Prometheus than with that of Socrates, and more to do with Nietzsche’s ideal of human freedom than with Spinoza’s.

Berlin uses the terms “depth” and “profundity” to describe the romantic version of the infinite. Here is a passage in which he expatiates on the sense that the romantics gave these terms:

When I say that Pascal is more profound than Descartes...or that Kafka is a more profound writer than Hemingway, what exactly am I trying unsuccessfully to convey by means of this metaphor?...According to the romantics—and this is one of their principal contributions to understanding in general—what I mean by depth, although they do not discuss it under that name, is inexhaustibility, unembraceability. ..[I]n the case of a work that is profound the more I say the more remains to be said. There is no doubt that, although I attempt to describe what

their profundity consists in, as soon as I speak it becomes quite clear that, no matter how long I speak, new chasms open. No matter what I say I always have to leave three dots at the end. (RR, 102-103)

Plato thought that inquiry and reflection would eventually bring one to a full stop, to a point beyond which no new chasms opened. His hope that argument will eventually bring us to a point where it is unnecessary to leave three dots at the end epitomizes the jigsaw puzzle view of the human situation—the view that there is a grand overall meaning to human life in general, rather than merely small transitory meanings that are constructed by individuals and communities and deconstructed by their successors.

Universalists think that, as Kierkegaard put it, we already have the truth within us, that our self-knowledge is a knowledge of God. So we can recognize the truth when we hear it—recognize that there are no more pieces that need to be fitted together. For if the truth were not somehow already within us, then Sartre would be right: the search for truth would be a futile passion.

The romantics became convinced that conceptualization and argumentation would always leave three dots at the end, and then leapt to the conclusion that it is the poet, or, more generally, the imaginative genius, who will be our redeemer, rather than the sort of thinker whose aim is demonstrative certainty and argumentative invulnerability.

Berlin says that Friedrich Schiller introduced , “for the first time in human thought”, the notion that “ideals are not to be discovered at all,

but to be invented; not to be found but to be generated, generated as art is generated.” (RR, p. 87) Simultaneously, Shelley was telling Europe that the poet glimpses the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present. For both, the poet—the person whose imagination lets us change our self-image—does not fit past events together in order to provide lessons for the future, but rather provides the stimulus necessary for us to turn our backs on the past in order that our future may be wonderfully different.

So much for Berlin’s account of the romantic revolt against universalism. When this revolt was modulated into a philosophical key the result was a series of attempts to describe what Habermas calls “an other to reason”. Philosophers made such attempts because they thought of depth as providing a kind of legitimacy that would substitute for the legitimacy that resides in universal agreement. Agreement is, for romantics, as more recently for Foucault, simply a way of procuring conformity to current beliefs and institutions. Depth does not produce agreement, but it for romantics it trumps agreement.

In the dialectic that runs through the last two centuries of philosophical thought, and that Habermas summarizes in his book, the universalists decry each new other to reason as endangering both rationality and human solidarity, and the romantics rejoin that what is called rationality is merely a disguise for the attempt to eternalize custom and tradition. The universalists rightly say that to abandon the quest for intersubjective

agreement is to abandon the restraints on power which have made it possible to achieve some measure of social justice. The romantics say, with equal justice, that acquiescing in the idea that only what everybody can agree on can be regarded as true means surrendering to the tyranny of the past over the future.

Formulating the opposition in these terms brings me to my central thesis: that pragmatism, and its defense of Protagorean anthropocentrism, should be viewed, not as a version of romanticism, but as an alternative to both universalism and romanticism. This is why the philosophers' quarrel with the sophists is not the same as their quarrel with the poets. The pragmatist response to the dialectic Habermas summarizes in *THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY* is to say that talk of universal validity is simply a way of dramatizing the need for intersubjective agreement, while romantic ardor and romantic depth are simply ways of dramatizing the need for novelty, the need to be imaginative.

Neither need should be elevated over, or allowed to exclude, the other. Instead of asking epistemological questions about sources of knowledge, or metaphysical questions about what there is to be known, philosophers can simply do what Dewey tried to do: help his fellow-citizens balance the need for consensus and the need for novelty. Suggesting how to achieve such balance is not, of course, not something that philosophy professors are better at than members of other academic disciplines. To suggest ways of achieving such balance is the work of anyone with ambitions to reshape the surrounding culture. That is why carrying through on F. C. S. Schiller's

humanism—his attempt to rehabilitate Protagoras' claim that man is the measure of all things—would mean giving up the idea that there is a special sort of activity called "philosophizing" that has a distinctive cultural role.

On the view of culture I am suggesting, intellectual and moral progress is achieved by making claims that seem absurd to one generation into the common sense of the later generations. The role of the intellectuals is effect this change not by brainwashing, but by explaining how the new ideas might, if tried out, solve, or dissolve, problems generated created by the old ones. Neither the notion of universal validity nor that of a privileged access to truth are necessary to accomplish this latter purpose. We can work toward intersubjective agreement without being lured by the promise of universal validity, and we can introduce new and startling ideas without attributing them to a privileged source.

What both Platonist universalists and Nietzschean romantics find most exasperating in pragmatism is its suggestion that we shall never be purified or transfigured, but only, with luck, become a little more grownup, a little more able to avoid the miseries and perplexities that tormented our ancestors and to achieve some of our utopian hopes. The trouble with both universalist metaphors of grandeur and romantic metaphors depth is that they suggest that a practical proposal, whether conservative or radical in character, can gain strength by being tied in with something that is not, in Russell's words, merely of here and now—something like the intrinsic nature of reality or the uttermost depths of the human soul.

Universalists who relish metaphors of height to suggest that rational consensus is a matter of the attractive force exerted on the human mind by something super-human, something located, as Plato put it, beyond the heavens—the place where the pieces of the jigsaw come together and form luminously clear pattern. People who relish those metaphors see inquiry as having an exalted goal called “Truth”, which they think of as something more than successful problem-solving. The traditional idea that truth consists in correspondence with reality is an outgrowth of the jigsaw puzzle view of inquiry.

By contrast, Berlin’s view that the best we can do in politics is to iron out as many conflicts as possible exhibits the same pragmatist attitude as Kuhn’s view that the best we can do in science is to resolve anomalies as they arise. But for thinkers like Russell and Nagel, universal agreement on the desirability of a political institution or the truth of a scientific theory is not, as it is for pragmatists, just a happy social circumstance, but also a sign that we are getting closer to the true nature of man or of nature.

Romantics who relish metaphors of depth, and who share Schiller’s belief that good new ideas are products of the imagination, set aside the idea of correspondence with reality. So they have a lot in common with pragmatists. But romantics often make the mistake Habermas attributes to enthusiasts for Heideggerian world-disclosure: they neglect their responsibility to make these recently invented ideas plausible by explaining how the new institution or the new theory might solve problems that the old institutions or theories could not handle. The romantic often tells us that

what is needed is authenticity rather than argument, as if the fact that she has had a new idea were enough to exempt her from the responsibility of explaining the utility of that idea.

Thus when Christ is described as the way, the truth and the light, or when Heidegger tells us that Hitler is the present and future reality of Germany, the claim is that our old ideas, our old problems, and our old projects, should simply be shelved, in order that our minds may be completely taken over by the new. The sheer breathtaking novelty of the claim is treated as making it unnecessary to make it plausible. Instead of being awed by superhuman grandeur, we are to be awed by Promethean daring. Instead of being told that we have been elevated to the level of unchanging Truth, we are told that we have finally been put in touch with our deepest, self.

If we abandon metaphors of height, we shall see neither the ability to attain universal agreement on some updated version of Newton's Principia, nor the need for universal respect for the provisions of the Helsinki Declaration on Human Rights, as an indication that these documents have some privileged relationship to reality. Both the prospect of a fully unified system of scientific explanation and that of a world civilization in which human rights are respected have grandeur. But grandeur in itself is obviously not an indication of validity. Grandeur is inspiring, and if we had no taste for it we should make little progress. But it is neither more nor less inspiring than depth. For the appeal to something overarching and invulnerable, and the appeal to something ineffable and exhaustibly deep, are both just advertising slogans, public relations gimmicks—ways of gaining our attention.

One will see these appeals as gimmicks if one accepts the pragmatist suggestion that we do not need words like "intrinsic" or "legitimate" or "unconditional" or "basic" or "objective" to supplement such banal expressions of praise or blame as "sounds plausible," "would do more harm than good", "fits the data", "offends our instincts", "might be worth a try" and "is too ridiculous to take seriously". Pragmatists think that no inspired poet or prophet should argue from the source of his inspiration to the utility of his enlargement of our sense of what is possible. Nor should any defender of the status quo argue from the fact of intersubjective agreement to the future utility of the theory or policy about which consensus has been reached. Neither consensus nor imaginativeness is good in itself, because there is nothing that is good "in itself". But one can still value intersubjective agreement after one has given up the jigsaw puzzle view of things and the idea that we have a faculty called "reason" that is somehow attuned to the intrinsic nature of things. One can still value imaginative power even after one has given up the romantic idea that the imagination is such a faculty.

I shall conclude by returning to the contrast I drew at the beginning between the days when philosophy was central to intellectual life and our own time, when it has become something of a sideshow. The main reason for this, as I said earlier, is the same as the reason why the issue of theism vs. atheism strikes us as antique—the fact that nowadays we are all commonsensically materialist and utilitarian. But there is a further reason. This is that the quarrels which, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gradually replaced the warfare between the gods and the giants—

the quarrels between poetry and philosophy and between the Platonists and the Protagoreans-- have by now become old hat.

The intellectuals of recent times have grown accustomed to watching philosophical fashion swing back and forth between enthusiasts for grandeur such as Russell and Nagel, and celebrations of ineffable profundity of the sort found in Bergson and Heidegger. Their interest in this spectacle has cooled. It has become harder to persuade them that the fate of civilization depends either on avoiding the excesses of scientific rationalism or on guarding against the frivolous irrationalism of the litterateurs. Even the arguments about relativism between pragmatists like myself and those who denounce us as “deniers of truth” excite only very languid interest. The idea that the philosophical foundations of our culture need attention or repair now sounds a bit silly, since it is a long time since anybody thought that it had foundations, philosophical or otherwise. For the Cartesian idea of a “natural order of reasons”, a ahistorical and transcultural inferential structure that dictates a natural priority of some questions to other questions, no longer has much appeal.

Perhaps the best way to describe the diminishing interest in philosophy among the intellectuals is to say that the infinite is losing its charm. We have become not only common-sensical materialists but common-sensical finitists—people who believe that when we die we rot, that each generation will solve old problems only to create new ones, that our grandchildren will look back on many of our struggles with bemused incredulity, and that progress toward greater justice and freedom is neither inevitable nor

impossible. We are content to see ourselves as a species of animal that makes itself up as it goes along, and so will never be quite sure that we are going in the right direction. The secularization of high culture that thinkers like Spinoza and Kant helped bring about has gradually led, in the course of the last two centuries, to both the scientists and the poets finding philosophy as dubious as theology. For secularization has put us in the habit of thinking horizontally rather than vertically—figuring out how we might arrange for a slightly better future, rather than looking up to an outermost framework or down into ineffable depths. Philosophers who think all this is just as it should be can take a certain rueful satisfaction in their own steadily increasing irrelevance.

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