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Dialogue with Six Critics

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Theory at its best should be a kind of friendship. Thinking is something one does on one's own; but having thought one's way to a set of theoretical positions, one exposes those intellectual commitments to the test of seeing how they stand up to friendly but challenging scrutiny. I'm grateful for the critical commentaries on my book featured in this symposium because they seem to me to have generated interesting and thoughtful responses to what I have written; but I'm no less grateful because they also nicely exemplify this spirit of dialogical friendship. In that way, they help to vindicate the enterprise of theory as I have just characterized it. These theorists are also my friends, and the friendship is constitutively grounded in a shared commitment to theory as a vocation.

I don't see any significant differences between me and Leah Bradshaw in what she says about Arendt. I'd prefer to take up what she says about Freud and Weber, and Weber in particular. Bradshaw writes that for Beiner "resolution in the face of tragedy is the core of political philosophy." In the Second Prologue I try to make the case that Freud and Weber are post-Nietzscheans, or are shaped by a post-Nietzschean sensibility. And that largely means: embracing tragedy as the route to a nobler and deeper view of life. But in Weber's case, that means not only (qua Nietzschean or post-Nietzschean) *practicing* political philosophy but also *rejecting* it. For we are presented with multiple conflicting gods, and we have to *choose* (*merely* choose, I would say) which one we will serve. In Weber as cited by Bradshaw: it's ultimately a matter of *courage*. But then *reason* isn't the ultimate standard; and if reason isn't the arbiter, it isn't political philosophy! (I come back to this issue in my response to Charles Blattberg.)

In another book, *Political Judgment*, I suggested that "all human judgment is tragic judgment." Some subsequent readers have expressed admiration for that line, but I have come to see it as a bit melodramatic. Don't we make lots of reasonable judgments that are *not* locked in a tragic situation? Why privilege the tragic judgments? Nietzsche, needless to say, wanted to *ramp up the pathos*, and Weber clearly went along with that aspect of Nietzsche's agenda, whereas I don't think I'm enough of a Nietzschean for that. Nietzsche wanted to ramp up the pathos as a way of compensating for (what he saw as) the banal, *despiritualizing* character of modernity. To some extent, Weber wanted this too. In the book under discussion (lii n26), I cite both Strauss and Voegelin asking, why did Weber have such a deep *inner*

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need for tragedy? I'm with them on this. The need for tragedy can be seen as a character flaw as much as strength of character! One could say: a need for tragedy like Weber's is a test of how Nietzschean one is. I fail this test, and I'm quite comfortable failing it.

Let me illustrate this whole set of questions by citing an important philosophical (metaphysical!) issue that crops up repeatedly in my book: see for instance p. xxxviii (including notes 11 and 12) and p. liii (including note 28). Plato's view is that there's a fundamental *unity* of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Nietzsche explicitly and deliberately contradicts Plato, asserting very emphatically that there is a fundamental *disharmony* of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Simone Weil sides with Plato, Weber sides with Nietzsche. There is no middle ground here: one either agrees with the Socratic-Platonic thesis of metaphysical harmony, or one agrees with the Nietzschean-Weberian thesis of metaphysical disharmony. I'm not sure that I'm equipped to pronounce a final verdict on the metaphysical harmony or disharmony of the cosmos (nor am I sure whether Plato, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or Max Weber are any better equipped). In all likelihood, it remains an open question. I'm not persuaded that Plato has been refuted on this, and insofar as I lean one way I'd prefer to lean in Plato's direction. And certainly: if the ultimate alternative to Plato is Weber's "warring gods" (which, as I discuss in the Second Prologue, one can also find in Freud), then I'd very definitely side with Plato, simply because Plato privileges reason over will. I understand the appeal of a tragic view of life, and in that sense I've been drawn to Nietzsche right from the start of my life as a theorist. But Nietzsche is dangerous, and getting carried away by the tragic view is also dangerous. I'm trying to resist that—to hang on to an untragic view if I can.

Ed Andrew and I have had lots of spirited disagreements over the course of a long friendship. But those disagreements look very minor indeed relative to our overarching solidarity concerning the humanistic and humanizing mission of theory, as one can easily see from Andrew's flattering commentary. Andrew concludes by asking: what is our common world? The answer is fairly obvious, for if there were no common world, there would be no politics, and if so, no subject matter for political philosophy. Andrew poses the question as if he endorsed postmodern radical pluralism, but in fact, as his commentary makes clear, he's as committed to a political world unsplintered by postmodernism as I am.

I'm full of gratitude for Daniel Tanguay's thoughtful account of what my purpose is in this book. There's nothing in Tanguay's commentary with which I disagree. Tanguay raises the question whether what I have offered is a "eulogy" for a practice of grand theory that is nearly dead. His view of the state of contemporary theory is rather more severe than mine. In the background of Tanguay's narrative is the liberal complacency associated with Francis Fukuyama's "end of history." But Tanguay and I agree that there *is* no end of history! New antiliberal ideologies are on the rise in our own day: there's an alarming resurgence of odious ideologies today. In his last

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paragraph, Tanguay emphasizes that while epic theory as I celebrate it may be dormant, it "might have a great future before it" in the face of these new ideological challenges. This is a paradox I note at the end of my book: things that are a catastrophe for humankind can be productive of theorizing of real grandeur. One of the main reasons that one had great theory in the mid-twentieth century is that Western civilization was shaken to its very core. And that's not just true of twentieth-century theory—think of the catastrophe of the Peloponnesian War and Thucydides; or the collapse of Rome and *The City of God*; or the catastrophe of the English Civil War and Hobbes. In that sense, *we pay a high price* for the masterpieces of political thought that make up our canon! If it's guaranteed that catastrophes await us in history to come, the silver lining may be that it's *also* guaranteed that grand theorizing will have more of a future than it may appear at present to have.

Simone Chambers writes: "Habermas and Rawls … try to push political philosophy beyond the great metaphysical debates," and they deserve credit for doing that (a credit I refuse to accord them). "Only discourses of justification can generate validity in a postmetaphysical world. If we look at democracy this way, then our constitutions, rights, and freedoms, our equal opportunities to participate and speak, the fair regulation of the public sphere, and the accountability of our representatives are all to be understood in discourse-theoretic terms…. Thus legitimacy is purely procedural." For reason has become "a completely proceduralized reason."

Contrary to Habermas and Chambers, one can't draw substantive commitments out of a merely formal or proceduralist ethics. And Habermas has very robust substantive commitments (very attractive ones, in fact!). So the proceduralist ethics is acting as a *cover* for those substantive commitments. This is one of the many things I believe I learned from Charles Taylor and also from Gadamer's critique of Habermas. So, contrary to what Chambers suggests, I don't think that I've misunderstood Habermas. I know exactly how Habermas presents the ideal speech situation. But I don't take that at face value—because I think the appeal to proceduralist ethics is serving as a stand-in for something much more substantive, namely an ideal of how social life *should* be.

Contrary to Chambers, I don't accept that we inhabit "a postmetaphysical world." First example: the doctrine that there is a correspondence between politics and the soul is a metaphysical view. But the doctrine that there *isn't* such a correspondence is *also* a metaphysical view. Plato is neither more nor less metaphysical than liberals like Rawls and Habermas, and vice versa. Second example: I once was present at a philosophical exchange between Habermas and Rorty. Rorty was trying to make the case that there was no principled objective boundary between the natural sciences and the human sciences, to which Habermas replied: atoms don't talk to each other. I think Habermas was right about this, but that's not a postmetaphysical view. It presupposes a metaphysics as much as the opposite view does.

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Thirdly, consider the Habermasian doctrine that the true, the good, and the beautiful are governed by distinct logics of validity. This is related to the Plato/Nietzsche metaphysical quarrel that I discussed in responding to Bradshaw. Habermas's view is a *philosophical* claim; it can't be decided by a post-Weberian sociology of modernity, as Habermas claims that it can. As I suggested above, the debate between Plato and Nietzsche on whether truth, beauty, and goodness are unitary or in fundamental discord is yet to be decided. Whichever side one takes on a question like this, *it's metaphysical either way*. This business of getting beyond metaphysics is, I would guess, an overreaction on the part of Habermas to what he clearly saw as the intellectual (and moral) pathology of Heidegger. Moreover, I just don't buy the idea of Habermas as an "antifoundationalist." He's striving for some ultimate way of leveraging a privileged vision of political life. That's a foundation, an Archimedean point. He wants to purge Kantian ethics of its metaphysics, but he is as much of a foundationalist as Kant is.

Habermasian political philosophy smuggles in certain dogmas presented in the guise of postmetaphysical "openness." One of these relates to the problem of historicism as it figures, for instance, in Strauss's critique of historicism. As is true also for Rawls and Rorty, *history* rather than the making of a philosophical case seems to do most of the work—the heavy lifting—of establishing validity. Hence what Chambers refers to as a "sociological/historical learning process." That is, *history* delivers us to a new mode of experience and a new kind of rationality, *beyond metaphysical commitments*. But in fact there is no such thing. For Rawls, Rorty, and Habermas, Nietzsche has been refuted by history and sociology. *He hasn't!* He can only be refuted by a more compelling account of the human good. And I believe that such an account is in principle philosophically available—in fact, would be more available *in Habermas* if he were more up front about his real commitments.

The majority of people in Egypt today believe that sharia should be the law of the land, and that Egypt should be a theocratic state. The view here is that *piety* and not discursive or communicative equality should be the center of political existence. Who can guarantee that that view won't prevail a hundred years from now? And what happens to the appeal to procedural rationality and to pluralism as a sociological fact if it *does* prevail? John Gray recently denounced "the liberal delusion," the presumption that history favors liberalism (that is, favors the idea of each individual having equal status in the conversation of one's society). As Gray rightly pointed out, that presumption is unwarranted. Human history is as much a process of *unlearning* as of learning!

Habermas's proceduralism and his (largely unacknowledged) philosophy of history cover over a lot of tacit liberal complacency. But again, we can't let history make our arguments for us: moral-political commitments have to be argued for on the ground of the best account we can come up with as regards what best satisfies human longings and worthy human ends. As a citizen, I find the conceptions of civic life articulated by Habermas and Rawls attractive: tolerant, oriented towards the encouragement of civic

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deliberation and mutual respect among people who share a political community, and oriented towards the encouragement of public-mindedness. Our political communities would certainly be better *as* political communities if they more fully embodied these liberal, egalitarian, and civicist ideals. But the practice of political *philosophy* that Rawls and Habermas stand for, and that Chambers defends, represents a kind of "fifth-wheelism" of philosophy. Rawls, Rorty, and Habermas presume that people who live in modern liberal polities already know what the ultimate political good is, and there's nothing that political philosophy can tell them that adds anything significantly new. It simply crystallizes the wisdom that liberal citizens already embody in their *practice* of citizenship: they deliberate with each other; they trade reasons and counterreasons; they presume that policies cannot be enforced without public justifications; and they treat each other as equals. If it's these *procedures* that embody the right moral philosophy and if everyone already knows that this is what a modern liberal democracy entails, *why do we need philosophy?* "A completely proceduralized reason" means that there is nothing further for philosophers to teach. Citizens in their procedural republic have already taught themselves all the essential moral truths. As Tanguay suggested, these liberals all stand for a kind of "end of history" Hegelianism. But as I've intimated, this self-willed redundancy on the part of leading theorists of egalitarian liberalism will start to look perilous if history surprises us and keeps premodern and antimodern alternatives in vibrant contention with a liberalism that isn't universally received as attractive.

Chambers writes as if I'm excluding Habermas and Rawls from the political philosophy club. But both are in my book! The nub of my complaints against them is that Rawls offers a comprehensive doctrine pretending to be a "political doctrine," and Habermas offers a substantive view of the human good pretending to be a proceduralist view.

With Emma Planinc's commentary, we move from Habermas to Foucault—from the privileging of rational discourse to the privileging of what is supposedly deeper and freer than reason. These two thinkers represent the furthermost poles of contemporary theory, and perhaps in some sense the radically opposing poles of *all* theory, going all the way back to Plato. Here one immediately sees that I am far closer in my intellectual commitments to Habermas than Chambers gives me credit for.

I'm grateful to Planinc for bringing into the discussion a dimension of Foucault's thought that is very important and that got left out of my Foucault chapter. Planinc's nice formulation: *Madness and Civilization* is "the older brother" of *Discipline and Punish*. I think that formulation is correct. According to Planinc's account, Foucault's purpose was to present himself as a champion of madness as a kind of higher sanity, a champion of poetry as a kind of higher prose, and a champion of Dionysian wisdom as a kind of higher rationality. As Planinc presents Foucault's most provocative insights, madness is regarded as a vehicle to a more exotic destination, and rationality serves merely to "tether" that ship! When reason is unmoored, it

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sails to somewhere more interesting, and hence we ought to regret the moorings that conventional rationality supplies. That's an arresting image, and it unquestionably captures the vision of existence beyond confining rationality that Foucault sought to conjure up.

I certainly don't want to rule out the possibility that such a thing as Dionysian wisdom exists as a human possibility. But political philosophers as political philosophers must privilege prose over poetry, sanity over madness, and reason (*logos*) over nonreason. Hence one can indeed champion Dionysian wisdom, but one is compelled to make a case for it in a medium *other than* Dionysian wisdom. Why? Because engaging in the enterprise of political philosophy (and Foucault *does* engage in that enterprise, whether he avows it or not) means writing books meant to bring people around to seeing the force of insights that they would otherwise overlook; getting them to appreciate conceptions of life that are otherwise beyond their horizons. One has to *persuade* people that they're slighting possibilities of human life that in fact are humanly important. Writing a book in reasonable prose (even if it champions something higher than reasonable prose)—and Foucault wrote *many* such books!—already bespeaks a commitment to rational dialogue and rational persuasion.

I particularly appreciate the Bernard Williams quote that Planinc draws from p. 19 of *Truth and Truthfulness*: Foucault may be counted as one of those theorists who hold "up a sign saying that something is true or plausible or worth considering, and then [try] to vacate the spot before the shutter clicks." There's a sense in which this is true and a sense in which it's not. Yes, Foucault was resistant to acknowledging that he participates in the enterprise of normative theorizing: of articulating visions of how fully flourishing human beings *should* live. But contrary to his disclaimers, he *did* participate in that enterprise and *did* articulate visions of less truncated, less stultifying social existence. That's why his books have had such an overwhelming impact on the world of political philosophy, and why all political philosophers today are obliged to read him.

Emphasis on my steadfast rationalism is a good segue to the critique offered by Charles Blattberg, for Blattberg charges me with *aestheticizing* theory. It would be a fair accusation only if my ultimate standard for judging these theorists was grandeur, or "epicness," or monumentality, or whatever one wanted to call it (maybe sublimity). But that's not my standard, although such standards are not irrelevant to what draws us to this enterprise and keeps it interesting. The ultimate standard is *truth*. Hence, those who charge me with aestheticism do so because they discount my earnest and committed rationalism, my dedication to reason as the standard of all theorizing.

Blattberg says that I'm neither a monist nor a pluralist but rather a dualist. I agree: I believe that theory is a high human vocation. And I believe that citizenship is a high human vocation. And what they each demand of us is categorically different: citizenship requires prudence and moderation while

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theory requires intellectual radicalism and "excess." Citizenship is a high vocation because it matters, humanly speaking, that we be able to coexist on civil terms with people with whom we share a political existence; and theory is a high vocation because *thinking* (ambitious reflection and self-reflection) matters.

Contrary to what Blattberg suggests (as captured in his image of me as a judge in a sporting competition), I don't get to render *final judgment* on these theorists. Straussians will say that I don't give Strauss his due, Habermasians like Chambers will say that I don't give Habermas his due, Arendtians will say that I don't give Arendt her due, and so on. I simply give my reasons for why I'm not—yet—fully persuaded by any of these twelve. And their followers will give reasons for why they're not persuaded by *my* reasons. And the dialogue goes on. Two of my theorists are still alive, and I recently participated in a sharp intellectual exchange with one of them (Alasdair MacIntyre). Naturally, he fought back against my criticisms of him. So he wasn't just subject to *my* judgment, *I* was also subject to *his* judgment!

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