

The Scavenger

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Given the occasion of this piece, it seems appropriate to frame this personal reflection with stories. Those who knew Richard J. Bernstein knew that very little time would pass in conversation before he launched into storytelling. Some recounting of experiences during his remarkable life populated almost all of the discussions of philosophy in my experience of him in the classroom and in our conversations. These narratives included his participation in the Freedom Ride to Mississippi, his first meeting with Hannah Arendt, the Praxis Group in Yugoslavia, as well as time spent with his 'good friend Dick Rorty' at the University of Chicago and beyond.

1.

As I sat at the computer to compose lines upon hearing of Richard J. Bernstein's passing in July, my fingers became inert on the keyboard and, as so often with loss, the easy and familiar language used in describing those loved and deeply admired vanished. Only a week earlier I had attended a dinner where the host, upon learning I was a professor of philosophy, relayed to me that he had earned an MA in philosophy at University of Buenos Aires, and had since moved to the small village in the Cordoba region of Argentina where he lived and was hosting our dinner now. It turns out he wrote his thesis on the topic of evil, and he proceeded to walk me over to his bookshelf and drew out a volume to recommend, one he considered essential to his work and that had changed his understanding of how one could even approach the topic philosophically. It was the Spanish translation of Bernstein's *Radical Evil*.¹ Upon explaining to him that I had done my graduate work at the New School, that Dick directed my dissertation and we had recently exchanged email, he had that look of incredulity mixed with what I would describe as a healthy sense of envy at the opportunity life had afforded me. This precise reaction has been a recurring experience in my life, on different continents and in different contexts, for three decades now. Each of these encounters confirms the breadth and depth of Bernstein's influence as well as the kind of admiration and respect he commanded.

Deep sadness at the passing of this most important teacher and advisor in my life one week later, though, left me without words. Nonetheless I felt an incredibly strong desire to articulate *something*. To mark the occasion with at least *some* attempt to bring to expression the mixture of gratitude, grief, and memories that flooded me,

¹ Richard J. Bernstein, *El Mal Radical*, trans. Marcelo G. Burello, 1st edition (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2014).

to begin the impossible task of comprehending the gift of my time with him, and take stock upon the sad completion of the time when the teacher I referred to was still living seemed the most appropriate response. As the text messages of former student colleagues and philosophers around the world with whom we had collaborated in conferences and publications began to light up my phone, I had a deep sense that I may not be the only one sitting before the page or the computer, searching for words and not finding any.

2.

The theme of this reflection on Richard J. Bernstein and the origin of title I have chosen for this piece is, in the first instance, also anecdotal, though it will serve to touch on some of the main themes of his thought that have had a particularly profound impact on me. Its origin is the occasion of a graduate student philosophy conference, “Pragmatism in the 21st Century,” organized at the home institution we shared, The New School for Social Research.² After several iterations of the annual conference, in 2004 the student organizers chose the work of one of our own, Bernstein, as the theme. After several days, and a keynote by Robert Brandom, the final panel brought together current and recent students in the spirit of a healthy Oedipal challenge to our collective *Doktorvater*. Each of the five students assembled were given the opportunity to ask the questions closest to our interests, to seek responses to our most burning issues with respect to Bernstein’s own thought and judgment, and no punches were pulled. The opening presentation by Morgan Meis made the Oedipal quality overt when he declared: “We were bred to fight and fight we shall.” If pragmatism is a philosophy funded by a recognition of the origin of thought in the struggle to meet our needs under conditions of practical duress, Meis questioned whether G.K. Chesterton may not be correct in asserting that pragmatism did not have the resources or depth to respond to the fact that “Pragmatism is a matter of human needs; and one of the first of human needs is to be

² With a colleague and former advisee of Bernstein’s, Lawrence Marcelle, I have written more systematically on Bernstein’s philosophy. See Hogan and Marcelle, “Any Democracy Worth Its Name: Bernstein’s Democratic Ethos and a Role for Representation,” in *Thinking the Plural: Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy*, eds. Megan Craig and Marcia Morgan (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) 61-82; and Hogan and Marcelle, “Abstract Objectivity: Richard J. Bernstein’s Critique of Hilary Putnam,” in *Richard J. Bernstein and the Pragmatic Turn in Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. Judith Green and Hugh McDonald (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014) 163-73.

something more than a pragmatist.” Meis proceeded to question the suggested harmony between pragmatic and Hegelian themes in Brandom and by extension, Bernstein.³ The opening bell had rung.

When the time for my own paper arrived, various critical questions were raised besides pragmatism’s relationship to Hegel, including Bernstein’s uneasiness with interpretations of a ‘new’ Wittgenstein as well as his relationship to critical theory. My remarks focused on several debates within pragmatism and, in particular, scholarship on Dewey.

I began by reconstructing how one of Bernstein’s earliest articles published in the *Journal of Philosophy*, “John Dewey’s Metaphysics of Experience,” had set the tone for later arguments with respect to the consequences of Dewey’s philosophy. Specifically, a central issue emerged as to how to simultaneously do justice to the depth of Dewey’s notion of experience and his conception of philosophy, and yet not slip into some of Rorty’s more eliminativist or deflationary readings of the consequences of pragmatism as articulated in his controversial essay, “Dewey’s Metaphysics.”⁴ Bernstein noted in his early piece that while “Dewey was forever seeing continuity where others claimed that there were sharp cleavages,” there is nonetheless “a deep crack, a basic discontinuity, that cuts through his naturalism,” specifically between the “phenomenological” and “metaphysical strains” around the crucial category of ‘quality’.⁵

Quality is enlisted by Dewey as a way to individuate situations from each other, situations being a crucial element of special meaning for his pragmatism. The qualitative aspects of situations as experienced are elements of reality as much as the molar objects that constitute independent features of the world in which we act. And, as time would tell with respect to a variety of Bernstein’s interests and positions, early work on neglected or surpassed thinkers would presciently figure in later debates.⁶

³ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (United Kingdom: John Lane Company, 1909) 64.

⁴ See Bernstein, “John Dewey’s Metaphysics of Experience,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 58, no.1 (1961): 5-14. Richard Rorty, “Dewey’s Metaphysics,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

⁵ Bernstein, “John Dewey’s Metaphysics of Experience,” 5.

⁶ Though it is beyond the scope of my remarks here, it is worth noting he returned to the question of Dewey’s naturalism in “Pragmatic Naturalism: John Dewey’s Living Legacy,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2019): 527-94. In this late text Bernstein returns to questions raised two years before “John Dewey’s Metaphysics of Experience” in “Dewey’s Naturalism,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1959): 340-53. It bears mentioning in terms of the oedipal context of the event related here, that Bernstein’s main target of sharp criticisms in the article is his own

As pragmatism experienced what Bernstein termed, following Cornel West, a “resurgence” that would eventuate in a ‘turn’, this precise “crack” became a central theme in Dewey scholarship between phenomenological and metaphysical registers of just that qualitative uniqueness that defines and delimits situations.⁷ Specifically, a debate arose as to whether a “metaphysics of existence” or a “metaphysics of experience” best captured the consequences of quality as a philosophical concept. This early article, along with a capacious introduction to an edited volume on Dewey’s writings are now approaching the status of ‘milestones’ in 20th century philosophy given the global explosion of interest in pragmatic philosophy.⁸ They come from a time in which pragmatism had lost its grip on the philosophical imagination of Anglo-European philosophy, as is well-known. In West’s own landmark contribution to this resurgence, he aptly referred to those “lonely laborers in the vineyard” of American pragmatism who persisted in demonstrating the relevance and depth of Dewey, James, and Peirce’s thought.⁹ In this group he included John McDermott, Morton White, and one of Bernstein’s teachers, John E. Smith, alongside the ‘Two Richards’.¹⁰

In addition, and most importantly for this story, I introduced a criticism I had heard various times, usually if not invariably from scholars operating in the analytic tradition, and I was eager to finally hear Bernstein’s response. In its harshest form the criticism is based on an interpretation of Bernstein’s work that he was ‘a commentator’

Doktorvater’s interpretation of Dewey, John E. Smith. “Pragmatic Naturalism” includes a wide-ranging discussion of naturalism in contemporary philosophy and Dewey’s relevance to this discussion. The discussion surveys the positions of Barry Stroud, Huw Price, Philip Kitcher, Peter Godfrey-Smith and others. Especially noteworthy is the articulation of pragmatic themes strongly resonant with Dewey’s naturalism in Joseph Rouse’s recent work. It is also notable that Dewey’s early critique of the reflex-arc concept in behavioral psychology is emphasized with respect to the human subject’s relationship to its environment and receives greater emphasis and the ‘deep crack’ in Dewey’s philosophy diagnosed earlier is less prominently registered. Finally, Bernstein’s last book, published posthumously, again takes up the question of naturalism, specifically in Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. See Bernstein, *The Vicissitudes of Nature* (Cambridge, UK; Hoboken NJ: Polity Press, 2022).

⁷ See Bernstein, “The Resurgence of Pragmatism,” *Social Research*, vol. 59, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 813-840; Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010); and Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 182.

⁸ See Bernstein, “Introduction” in John Dewey, *On Experience, Nature, and Freedom*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Press, 1960).

⁹ Cornel West, 194-195. *op. cit.*

¹⁰ For an illuminating discussion of Rorty and Bernstein’s relationship, see Robert Westbrook, “A Tale of Two Dicks,” *Confines of Democracy: Essays on the Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein*, eds. Ramón del Castillo, Angel M. Faerna, and Larry A. Hickman (Netherlands: Brill, 2015) 3-24.

and that insofar as he didn't develop a system, either located in a single specialized branch of philosophy such as metaphysics or ethics or a larger structure incorporating all branches of philosophy into a unified whole, his work isn't sufficiently *philosophically comprehensive*. Rather than echoing those rather shallow estimations of Bernstein's corpus, I did find something in them that resonated with even a more nuanced appreciation of his work. I took advantage of the situation, with some trepidation.

"Where," I queried, "do you finally stand on metaphysics as a branch of philosophy, as providing a 'ground map of the provinces of criticism' within the overarching philosophical activity of the 'criticism of criticisms'? What finally is your judgment on the metaphilosophical status of questions of 'ontology' and inquiry generally hypostatized in non-pragmatic modes as 'perennial philosophy'? How do you respond to those who see the absence of an overarching philosophical system as a deficit in your thought? Given your criticisms of logical empiricism and its positivistic legacy in the social sciences and political philosophy, what positive characterization, what determinate judgment would you offer of metaphysics and ontology and how would you characterize your position?"

While Rorty would unhesitatingly advance into the void left by the aporia of the phenomenological and metaphysical tensions in Dewey's work, remarking that his attempt to rehabilitate metaphysics through his concept of the "generic traits of existence" was simply an occasion of him "coming down with a disease he was trying to cure," I had not read nor heard exactly what Bernstein's position was on these specific questions, though he had himself obviously addressed metaphysical and ontological themes in his work and even served as president of the Metaphysical Society of America in 1988.¹¹

Before turning to his response, it is worth remembering that a consequence of the centrality of the 'qualitative situation' in Dewey and even in its attenuated form in Bernstein's work, is that place is important, context is crucial, and the location of this conference provides background that makes Bernstein's *logos* in response to our inquiries all the more remarkable. He took the podium in the Ernst Wolff Conference room of the Albert List Academic Center where the Graduate Faculty of The New School for Social Research was housed at 65 Fifth Avenue. It was a podium from

¹¹ Rorty, "Dewey's Metaphysics," *op. cit.*, 88. See also Bernstein's presidential address to this society where he defends metaphysics from radical skepticism but stops short of the kind of judgments these questions asked for. Bernstein, "Metaphysics, Critique, and Utopia," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 42, no. 2 (December 1988): 255-273.

which I had been fortunate to listen to and learn from many of the visiting philosophical luminaries of our time: Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, Seyla Benhabib, Kwame Appiah, Jurgen Habermas, Julia Kristeva, Zlatko Zizek, Axel Honneth and many others. Just a decade and a half earlier Bernstein had left Haverford College to reconstruct a storied but dissipated program that had famously begun as a home for refugees from fascism in Europe. The philosophy department at the University in Exile, as it was called at that time, became a well-known center for the study of 'Continental' philosophy but had lost its accreditation.¹² I rehearse these details not only to provide light on the institutional context to this occasion. In addition, as we will see, this move, this willingness to leave a renowned department he had helped to create at Haverford in order to rebuild a department in crisis resonates rather deeply with Bernstein's reply to his students on this occasion.

After remarking that while he initially felt some strangeness at being the subject of a conference organized by the graduate students of his own department and whose purview for selecting topics was wide open, he nonetheless "wouldn't be human" if it did not touch him and gratify him to have his students choose to hold a festival of his thought. He then began an impromptu response to the panel's questions and with the assertion, "Look, I'm a scavenger!" and proceeded to detail his own vision of philosophy in encountering the tradition and his contemporaries. It was, for me, a kind of shock to hear him describe himself this way. The figure of the scavenger is not particularly glamorous either in its literal or figurative representations. In this, it evokes Socrates' equally humble image of the 'gadfly' and Bernstein was fond of quoting from Dewey's autobiographical essay for *The Library of Living Philosophers*, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" and illuminates Bernstein's own response to the questions I posed to him:

Although I have not the aversion to system as such that is sometimes attributed to me, I am dubious of my own ability to reach inclusive systematic unity, and in consequence, perhaps, of that fact also dubious about my contemporaries. Nothing could be more helpful to present philosophizing than a "Back to Plato" movement; but it would have to be back to the dramatic, restless, co-operatively inquiring Plato of the Dialogues, trying one mode of attack after another to see

¹² For an account of this chapter in the philosophy department's history, see Judith Friedlander, *A Light in Dark Times: The New School for Social Research and its University in Exile* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), part IV, "Between Past and Future."

what it might yield; back to the Plato whose highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn, and not to the artificial Plato constructed by unimaginative commentators who treat him as the original university professor.¹³

It says something deep about Bernstein's self-understanding not only of his own work but also the role of philosophy in the wider culture at our juncture in history. It stood in stark contrast, as well, to another representation given earlier in the conference by Megan Craig, and one with which I was more familiar in my experience at that time and since. Her opening remarks invoked Bernstein's pluralistic ethos in philosophy, his sensitivity and sympathy in reconstructing philosophical positions critical of and seemingly contradictory to his own philosophical commitments, and famously, of bringing into dialogue thinkers often presented as opposed to each other and discerning their similarities and mutual commitments that escaped more superficial readings. She characterized this mediating ethos as placing Bernstein "on the side of the angels."¹⁴ Indeed in his presidential address to the American Philosophical Association in 1989, he referred to the need for a "healing of wounds" in a profession that had been marked by territorialism, false oppositions between 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy, a lack of both fallibilism and pluralism in Anglo-American philosophy.¹⁵

But, a scavenger? It bears exploring. The figure of the scavenger evokes a variety of associations and each interweaves into an image, a *Darstellung*, of Bernstein that has become deeper and richer with time. To scavenge involves a search, a kind of hunt for that which serves our needs and occurs in a landscape that can be unforgiving and unyielding. We do not scavenge for what is ready to hand, we scavenge because what is ready to hand is not enough. We feel a lack and seek fulfillment in what we can find. Naturally, the animals involved in scavenging give an even darker cast to this

¹³ Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," *Contemporary American Philosophy: Personal Statements*, eds. George Plimpton Adams and William Pepperell Montague (London: George Allen and Unwin; New York: Macmillan Co., 1930) 21. See Bernstein, "The Rage Against Reason" *The New Constellation: Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Post-Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) 50.

¹⁴ Megan Craig, "On the Side of the Angels," opening remarks at "Pragmatism in the 21st Century," April 10-13, 2003, New School University, New York. Reprinted in the *Women in Philosophy Second Annual Journal of Papers* (2002-3) 39-43.

¹⁵ See Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 63, no. 3 (1989).

figure, and one that contrasts nicely with Jurgen Habermas' recent invocation of the "mole of reason," drawing upon Goethe, Marx, and Adorno before him. From a lecture delivered on the occasion of his 90th birthday, Habermas states:

Reason does not litigate, within the tumult of historical contingencies, in the sovereign manner of a dialectically ruling absolute spirit. It operates instead, in Marx's words, like a mole—namely, through the socialized subjects' own fallible cognitive, social-cognitive and political-moral learning processes. . . . The mole of reason is blind only in the sense that it recognizes the resistance of an unsolved problem without knowing whether there will be a solution.¹⁶

The scavenger, though, likewise has no hope in a cunning of reason to console it. In the non-human animal realm they are often represented as birds—a vulture, or as jackals. When applied to the human, scavengers are associated with those whose circumstances are reduced to the kind of necessity that forecloses easy flourishing, evoking another thinker whose works Bernstein scavenged for what was useful: Marx. The scavenger gives a different cast to the role of reason in history, pragmatically reconstructed as 'intelligence,' and one that recalls Bernstein's sensitivity to the tragedies, personal and world-historical, that occurred in his lifetime and what they meant for some of philosophy's more audacious pretensions. As with Habermas, these pretensions are no longer philosophically live options for Bernstein. And if we are to confront the problems of human beings, as opposed to the problems of philosophers, we must reorient thought to our present urgent needs. Unlike Rorty, and in some ways Habermas, Bernstein exercised a capacious generosity with respect to just what could strike a fellow human being as a pressing problem. He practiced an exemplary hermeneutics of charity with thinkers working within traditions of which he had elsewhere offered devastating criticisms and which exhibited precisely those pretensions just mentioned. But the scavenging eye is delicate; it learns to extricate what is of value from the carcass, from the refuse, and importantly from what current

¹⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, "Once Again: On the Relationship between Morality and Ethical Life," *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2021): 548. For Theodor W. Adorno's discussion of Goethe's mole, see Adorno's *Introduction to Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000): "I cannot give you instructions on how you should study sociology. I cannot do so for the very simple reason that I believe that if this study is to perform the educational function with which it has clearly been entrusted, it is a part of that function to preserve the autonomy of those being educated, who, like Goethe's famous mole, must 'seek their way in the murk,'" 5.

fashions of thought deem worthless. Perhaps, the figure of the scavenger in this sense is best illuminated by turning to the master thinker for both Bernstein and Dewey: Hegel. Hegel served in this role both in terms of the decades of his neglect in Anglo-American philosophy, and in terms of his philosophical method. Of course, for Bernstein, pragmatism had *naturalized* Hegelianism, and his own commitment to hermeneutics foreclosed Hegel's grand ambitions.

3.

In spring of 2022, I returned to a rereading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a text I spent a yearlong seminar studying with Bernstein. To begin this rereading, I used a translation of another former New School teacher of mine and longtime colleague and friend of Bernstein, Yirmiyahu Yovel. In 2003 Yovel had published a translation of and excellent commentary on the preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In reading one of his explications of Hegel's revolutionary text, in particular, I immediately thought of Bernstein. Hegel, in the paragraph in question, is articulating the dialectical character of philosophical refutation and writes, "When the refutation is fundamental, it is drawn and developed from the principle itself." Yovel comments:

A dialectical refutation of philosophical doctrines does not destroy what it criticizes, but develops and complements it; its act of negation becomes a positive layer in building the system of truth. As a first condition, such refutation must be immanent, that is, performed in terms of the criticized principle itself rather than thrust against it as an external assertion...A dialectical refutation actually completes the criticized principle, because it solves a specific problem, or fulfills some definite lack that it has identified in it: thus, it enriches and further develops the principle it refutes. That process will continue as long as the principle has not been fully developed, that is, until the series of its possible immanent refutation is exhausted.¹⁷

For me this passage evoked Dick's long career employing a kind of immanent and dialectical understanding of the philosophers and thinkers, living and dead, that he

¹⁷ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Hegel's Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 110-11.

illuminated, questioned, and criticized so clearly. There is also something important to recognize here that recalls Bernstein's invocation of Deweyan pragmatism as naturalized Hegelianism. A naturalized Hegelianism recognizes learning as evidenced by the human species, though the Hegelian claims regarding the absolute were not available or attractive to Bernstein. To naturalize Hegel is to limit systemic ambitions, analogous ones paradoxically evinced by those thinkers I mentioned, i.e., Habermas, Wittgenstein, Dewey, in the questions I relayed above from the conference on his work. Although those critics' orientation was as far from Hegel as possible, philosophically speaking, it was to the great detriment of their own self-consciousness.¹⁸ It throws into relief the position of the thinker, the person who would draw upon our inherited intellectual resources, bequeathed as they are from the history of our attempts to articulate and express the character of our human condition, and importantly, what it might become. Our situatedness, the context of our thought, is always thick with conditions that both enable and constrain our thinking, our scavenging. This limit opens a window into one of his other major areas of concern, hermeneutics. The work of interpretation and understanding exemplified in the thought of another of Bernstein's friends, Hans-Georg Gadamer, reveals a dimension of Bernstein's thought that extends our understanding of the finitude which circumscribes and transforms *theoria*.

Gadamer shared with Bernstein a commitment to an 'understanding of understanding' as a practical activity that involved *phronesis*, or a kind of intellectual

¹⁸ Bernstein diagnosed a certain blindness stemming from the fashionable rejection of Hegel that prevailed in analytic philosophy until the 1970s and only then in a few representative examples, until the 1990s and the following decades when the 'Pittsburgh Neo-Hegelians' completed his revival. In *Praxis and Action*, he wrote in a footnote: "The opening section of the Phenomenology, "Consciousness" which deals with "sense certainty," "perception," and "understanding" is rarely read and discussed by contemporary philosophers. This is a pity because these sections can be read as a perceptive and incisive commentary and critique of a dialectical development in epistemology which has been repeated in contemporary analytic philosophy. The stages in contemporary epistemological investigations which have moved from phenomenalism with its foundations in "sense data" to the emphasis on a "thing language" as an epistemological foundation, to the realization of the importance of "theoretical constructs" and finally the "new" concern with total "conceptual frameworks" or "language games" closely parallel the development that Hegel sketches for us in the opening sections of the Phenomenology. One can find analogies in the development of epistemology during the past fifty years for the difficulties that Hegel locates at each dialectical stage. I do not mean to suggest that Hegel was prophetic, but rather that he had a genuine insight into a dialectical progression of epistemological positions, which has repeated itself in a linguistic mode during our time. Bernstein. *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) 24n21.

virtue and habit that required practice and judgment and could not be articulated according to algorithmic formulae.¹⁹ Interpretation of others involves dialogue in its deepest sense of being open to the other and allowing an open search for truth, properly qualified. In addition, both Gadamer and Bernstein resisted Hegel's totalizing aims in his philosophy. A familiar refrain from Bernstein quoting Gadamer as conferences and conversations came to a close was: "No one gets the last word." Philosophical conversation doesn't stop with systemic closure. As Gadamer puts it in his closing line to an essay on Hegel's *Logic*: "dialectic must retrieve itself in hermeneutics."²⁰ Put bluntly with respect to the *Logic* and his own work, Gadamer claimed he was, as Bernstein relayed to us, unlike Hegel, "a philosopher of the bad infinite."

In Bernstein's eyes, Gadamer's hermeneutics moved philosophy closer to a living practice of a community conscious of its own limitations but nonetheless committed to dialogue and mutual understanding. These laudatory features, however, run into an element of contemporary society that pose a serious problem for the practice and phronesis necessary for such community, the dominance of capital and other power relations that undermined their possibility. As Bernstein put it:

But if we are really to appropriate this central idea to our historical situation, then it points us toward important practical and political tasks. It would be a great distortion to imagine that we might conceive of the entire political realm organized on the principle of dialogue or conversation. Nevertheless, if we think out what is required for such dialogue based on mutual understanding, respect, a willingness to listen and test one's opinions and prejudices, a mutual seeking of the objective rightness of what is said, then this provides us with a powerful regulative ideal that can orient our practical and political lives. If the quintessence of what we are is to be dialogical—and this is not just the privilege of the few—then whatever the limitations of the practical realization of this ideal, it nevertheless can and should give practical orientation to our lives. We must ask, what is it that blocks

¹⁹ For an articulation of Gadamer's position see "The Problem of Historical Consciousness" in *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, eds. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

²⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer and P. Christopher Smith, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) 99.

and distorts such dialogue, and what is to be done, “what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now” to make such dialogue a living reality?...[I]f we follow the logic of [Gadamer’s] own argument...the thrust of his reflections is to lead us beyond philosophical hermeneutics... to the genuinely practical task of concretely realizing what he has so nobly defended as central to our humanity.²¹

Though Gadamer in his own manner, like Bernstein, offers a philosophical vision committed to a kind of cooperative scavenging through dialogue and without foundations—or ‘banisters’, as Arendt put it—hermeneutics, then, must retrieve *itself* in praxis.²²

4.

I believe the unflinching recognition of our condition as human beings *in media res*, between past and future, that deeply informs a pragmatism which recognizes the power of immanent critique without absolute ambitions leaves us in a position both precarious and stable with respect to what we can become as a human community. It is with respect to the “genuinely practical task” of establishing the conditions of dialogue and mutual understanding as a living ethos in a community geared towards solving the “problems of humans” that the term ‘scavenger’ becomes so evocative. It is the task Bernstein set for himself in his writings on evil, violence, and the distortions to democracy that capital creates as a social system, something he consistently referenced in his teaching.

Throughout Bernstein’s response to his students’ questions closing out the conference on his work, I was once again struck by a virtuosity I had seen on innumerable occasions. It was the living experience of his classroom, after all, that put him in the national spotlight when Yale denied him tenure, sponsoring student protests and national news coverage. However, this intervention exemplified a

²¹ Bernstein, “From Hermeneutics to Praxis,” *Philosophical Profiles: Essays In A Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986) 114.

²² Elsewhere I have taken up the question of the relationship between democracy modeled on social inquiry and hermeneutics. See Brendan Hogan, “Practices of Interpretation: social inquiry as problem solving and self-definition,” in *Pragmatismo ed Ermeneutica: soggettività, storicità, rappresentazione*, eds. Anna M. Nieddu and Vinicio Busacchi (Milano-Udine, IT: Mimesis Press, 2019) 213-24.

combination of philosophical, dialogical, and pedagogical mastery that I had not witnessed up until that point and remains indelibly printed in my memory. Ranging across the diverse thinkers and topics raised, and beginning with his declaration of himself as a ‘scavenger’, he took what he thought to be the heart of the concerns of the students, the thinkers they invoked, and the problems posed, and offered a reconstruction of them through his own philosophical vision. At the end of the panel he approached me and in his gregarious fashion said ‘So, pugilism, huh?! Well, what do you think?’ I responded, ‘But you didn’t answer my questions!’ To which he quickly replied, laughing, ‘Of course not!’. Upon reflection, and with hindsight, it’s easier to see how the questions I posed were still saturated with the kind of metaphysical picture that led to that penchant for absolutism that Dewey tried to wrest the interpretation of Plato from, in the quote from his autobiographical essay above: the “dramatic, restless, co-operatively inquiring Plato of the Dialogues...the Plato whose highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn, and not to the artificial Plato constructed by unimaginative commentators who treat him as the original university professor.”²³ It is this Plato that Bernstein regularly referred to as ‘his first love’ in philosophy, a Plato much closer to a scavenger than a system-builder.

I close by returning to the image of my inert hands and frozen tongue, searching for words to send into the current along with thousands of others grieving the loss of this singular thinker, whom his colleague Simon Critchley rightly characterized some years after the conference and my departure from the New School as “one of the greatest philosophers of our time.”²⁴ Sitting with pen and paper, looking out at the Champaqui mountain, suddenly struck by the fact of all my *compañeres*, known and unknown, endowed professors, graduates, and undergraduates who went on to life outside the academy, and those who, like my friend at dinner just a week earlier, had only known him through his written work from across the globe and been changed forever; all those from Yale, Haverford, Frankfurt, Yugoslavia, to a New School philosophy department he ‘scavenged’ from its wreckage and those beyond who must have also been sitting silent, at the blank sheet before them, bereft of an exemplary thinker and teacher, a comrade who inspired, challenged, and changed them; unable at that moment to begin the work that we must, only now without our beloved professor, mentor, and friend, facing these dark times scavenging our

²³ Dewey, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” op. cit.

²⁴ Simon Critchley, back cover of Richard J. Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking Without Bannisters* (London: Polity Press, 2013).

memories, our mutual friends, and his written words recovering his radiant, penetrating light. Honestly, and for the record, I close with the only words I found a voice for during those difficult days.. “I really *loved* him.”

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