

## Afterword, or Fragment of an Apology (Summer 2019)

At one point in our conversations, I refer briefly to Franz Rosenzweig's letter in which he explained his rejection of a university lectureship. Scholars, he explained, are concerned to follow their own questions wherever they may lead and are impatient of those who might interrupt or redirect this quest. For him, the most important questions are those that others ask of him, not specialist questions but questions asked by whole human beings.<sup>1</sup> I'm not entirely convinced by Rosenzweig's conception of the university—at least as it exists for us now in distinction from the classical German university to which he responded in the 1920s. But one can certainly say that the questions of students are central to the proper functioning of the university and that a responsible philosopher must also respond to questions posed by the society at large. If not, thought does indeed tend toward too-great a specialization. A skilled and thoughtful interviewer can also play an essential role by bringing questions to the work from outside while at the same time retaining a respect for the internal dynamic of that work. This inside (specialist) versus outside (whole human) dialectic is essential to the philosopher's practice. Unlike other "specialities," which exist only as disciplinary studies within the university, philosophy was initially, and remains, an inquiry into how to lead the best human life. Andrew Bingham's questions sometimes point to hidden undercurrents in my thinking and even take us to the edge of what has been thought toward the openness from which thought emerges. For these reasons I am grateful to Andrew for his sustained reflection upon, and probing of, my work. It is in the tension between a striving for consistency and comprehensiveness versus an openness to the outside that the rigour of thinking consists.

Through the interviews two currents of thought emerge which have been through various stages of articulation in my writing and which push toward a yet-to-be-thought. It is these currents which I would like to address in this posterior reflection on what was a very interesting few day's collaborative discussion. The first begins with the concern with particularity and identity and ends, at least provisionally, with localization and locative thought. The second concerns the proper way to think negation and the relationship of negation to philosophy.

I began thinking about particularity under the influence of George Grant. In his well-known text *Lament for a Nation*, Grant defended the existence of Canada as against its absorption into the American empire. He defined the American empire through the concept of technology understood as a universalist will to dominate nature. All given states were seen to be subject to alteration by a will that was without limit. His defence of Canada as a particular way of life was based upon tradition rather than philosophy. Any particular tradition that dwells within the way of life of a people contains a justification of that way of life and a desire for it to continue. Since, as Grant argued, the contemporary Western philosophy had come to elevate technological domination above any given state of nature or society, then its critique could not be universalist but had to be based upon inherence in, and defence of, a particular tradition. Such a particular tradition grounds a sense of identity that is endangered by technology. However, this position is obviously deficient for someone committed to philosophy and its necessarily universal dimension. His subsequent works, especially *Technology and Empire*, attempted a critique of technology as the contemporary expression of universalist will. It therefore implied a conception of universality that would not dominate particular traditions but allow a diversity of

traditions reaching toward a non-homogenizing universality. Grant himself never took this up as a philosophical task but rather relied upon a religious universality—a matter of belief rather than reason and inquiry. He had a wide interest in pre-modern religious traditions that had not succumbed to technological will but his own commitment was to Anglican Platonism. To this extent I think that it is fair to say that Grant never attempted to develop a philosophical critique of technological will nor a universalist philosophy that could supplant it. He relied on tradition and religion as the basis for his critique.

In retrospect it is clear to me that it is my dissatisfaction with this aspect of Grant's thought that sent me on my own journey. I was a student of phenomenology and existentialism, a tradition of thought that criticized ungrounded universals and brought philosophy into closer contact with experience and pressing issues. This was the basis both for my appreciation of Grant and the necessity to provide a philosophical foundation for the critique of technological will. This element of my thought achieved a first full expression in *A Border Within* (1997). There I used the concept of identity as grounded in a particular tradition but framed it in relation to difference. These two are correlative terms that cannot be used singly. I did not, and do not, understand them as dialectical, however, since I prefer to use the term "dialectic" in a specific sense derived from Hegel. I understood identity as constituted through its abjection in difference under the influence of Emmanuel Levinas. The book worked out this relation of identity and difference mainly in relation to the issues of multiculturalism and environmentalism. (Since this time I have been very interested in whether the relation between identity and difference in ecology can come to the aid of social and political thought.)

Identity could thus be understood as based in particularity and therefore to imply a justification for the continuation of particularities as against a homogenizing universality. Difference could thus be understood as essential to the conception of identity and therefore to imply a maintenance of difference as essential to universality. Here, I had at least a first formulation of a philosophical critique of technological will and a non-homogenizing concept of universality that I had been looking for.

Simultaneously, I had become increasingly aware that the issue of identity and particularity was more plural than Grant had realized. He could speak of Canadian tradition as a particularity because he accepted the Loyalist version of Canadian history that tied Upper Canada to the British Empire. But the British Empire was as worthy of critique as the American and moreover there were, and are, many particularities within Canada just as worthy of defence. Modern states inherit and reproduce the structures of centralization and empire that made them possible. I thank my friend Roman Onufrijchuk for opening up this dimension to me by introducing me to the condition of the Ukrainian community in Canada. Gradually, this thread led me to understand empire of any kind as a false universality that operates through domination of the rules of interaction between particular communities. The new philosophical universality that I sought had, therefore, to be understood through rules of interaction that did not subsume particularities but emerged from, and could be negotiated by, particularities. To explicate this conception I drew upon some of the statements made by the Métis during the Northwest Rebellions, the *Declaration of the Lillooet Tribe* (1910), and the conception of federation expressed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

Out of these reflections emerged the concept of localization, or locative thought, that was central to *Identity and Justice* (2008). It is grounded in a phenomenology of going-out and

return as the basis for the experience of place. It was developed from a reflection on Heidegger's late work that I argued contained an emergent distinction between place and locality. Locative thought is thought looking for its location, not situated in a place, such that the description of the location and the being-there in the location are not given separately but are a simultaneous process of discovery. It justifies a conception of thought as a path, a journey, whose itinerary is a representation of a life's experience.

Andrew asked whether the concept of identity is adequate to such a conception of philosophical universality rooted in the going-outward and return from particular experience. I answered, as I have implicitly done here also, by saying that it was where my journey started: beginning from identity as rooted in particularity and ending (at least provisionally) in particularity as over-reaching itself toward universality. Insofar as identity may be understood as confining or exclusive, it would certainly be a problematic term since it would deny over-reaching, though it seems to contain the advantage of implicating "who one understands oneself to be," and therefore an existential dimension, into the rather dry term "particularity." I would agree that Andrew's suggested term "integrity" contains the advantage of allowing for, or even implying, an over-reaching and also the dimension of existential commitment and ethical responsibility. In addition, acting with integrity often requires an improvisational response to the otherness or difference that one encounters. So, I am willing to agree with him that "integrity" is a superior term and reflect that perhaps the use of "identity" stems from the singular sense of identity that Grant attributed to Canada. This would require, however, an additional step in which the progression from identity to integrity was explained—since it is not a step that all are willing to take. *Integrity and Justice* would be a title that would require greater explanation but would also likely be more adequate to what I was trying to express.

Let me shift to the second issue in our discussions: negation. The concept of negation is fundamental to philosophy because philosophy cannot confuse reality with a given, temporary state of affairs but must capture the movement of reality. Movement or, better, self-movement is a characteristic of reality by which things not only change into other things, and through which situations may reverse or fall apart, but is reality itself as movement. Locative thought attempts to think movement as self-movement and thus must understand negation as intrinsic to reality. While it is true enough that Hegel is the philosopher who has most thoroughly attempted to think movement as movement through the concept of dialectic, his attempt failed insofar as he thought *time as a category of being*—that is to say, he reduced movement to a static concept. Movement must inhabit all the categories not be reduced to one. Movement as movement requires that negation be understood as plural in relation to, not independent of, what it negates.

In an essay on the ethic of philosophizing that indicated my "return" to phenomenology after years working on Canadian philosophy (2004),<sup>2</sup> I discussed Heraclitus and the idea that meaning takes place between pairs of opposite terms and forces: war and peace, high and low, left and right, life and death, etc. Human life appears as a *polemos* between such forces. But the opposition of terms and forces can only take place because there is a space of meaning in which the oppositions can appear. How can one speak of that space, and the clearing of that space, itself? One must use terms that can always be placed in opposition, so that it is necessarily the case that any speech about the space can be interpreted (or misinterpreted) as a term within the *polemos*. A term for the space thus both uses its meaning and negates its

meaning. Let me take this issue no further now but simply note that shortly afterward my interest in negation began to take definite form through a study of privative negation in Moses Maimonides and Hermann Cohen. Very little of this work has appeared publicly to date. It connects closely to an issue that had concerned me for some time. Every particular tradition encompasses ultimate meanings and values that are used to order subordinate meanings and values into a way of life. How can one define or speak about these ultimate values? How can they be subject to reason? As ultimates they serve to order language and reason. Surely any language use or reasoning ability is subject to such ultimates and therefore can neither define them or justify them through reason. Definition requires contrasting terms. Reason requires conclusions to be shown from premises. But how can one reason about the legitimacy of the premises that serve as ultimates? How can one speak about those terms that serve to provide definitions of operative terms? This is a problem for any philosophy that incorporates a concept of totality: How can one speak about the Whole without using contrasting terms that are necessarily partial? Must the Whole be a matter of silent intuition? And, if so, how can it be philosophy and not belief?

This problem had nagged at me for years until I discovered that Maimonides had proposed a solution to it in the two chapters where he discusses how we may speak of and define God. I did not enter into the theological context as such but treated Maimonides' elegantly rational work as a proposed solution to the philosophical problem. His proposed solution depends on the concept of a privative negation which I took to be the germ of a philosophical concept of negation that avoided the Hegelian problem of making negation a concept such that it is surpassed by affirmation. Put briefly, a privative negation negates a noun and not a verb. A verbal negation turns "is" into "isn't" such that one is left with simply nothing. Negating a noun states that the positive content of the noun, which still appears in the negation, is not given in this case. When one says "this is not just," for example, one states that justice is absent in this case. If one were to say this about a goat or a desk it would not make sense. It only makes sense if the object in question were capable of being just. So, to say that "this action is not just" is to say that "where justice might have been expected, it is not to be found." The expectation of justice is rooted in particular traditions with their ultimates of meaning and value. The privative negation of that justice judges a particular case as failing to live up to the ideal of that tradition. Furthermore, such a privative negation suggests that justice itself is not to be found within that particular tradition but is something to which a particular tradition can only point or indicate in a partial manner. True justice remains a "beyond" for any particular tradition. There is in this conception a motive for dialogue with other particular traditions and therefore a basis for indicating a limitation within one's own tradition.

This is not the place to follow this thought any further. I hope that some of my work in the next few years will clarify it. I hope that it is apparent how it fulfils the issue delineated in the first current of thought above: How and why a particular tradition must be defended against its mere subsumption under a homogenizing universal—because access to a genuine universal requires particular roots. But it adds the equally important element that a particular tradition never encompasses justice as such. Thus we must all reach beyond the traditions that harbour what is most dear to ourselves. This is the universalizing claim of philosophy that all defence of particular traditions must embody if they are not to degenerate into ethnocentrism and fundamentalism. It would agree with the emphasis of "integrity" over "identity" in showing

how identity always threatens to become confining, even though “integrity” would entail a love for, and non-fundamentalist defence of, one’s particular tradition.

It is in this sense that I assert in the discussion that philosophy is always translatable. I would even go so far as to define philosophy by the necessary failure of any attempt to confine thought within a given tradition or set of ultimates. In this sense philosophy is a non-place which may perhaps be called a privation of being. It is thus brought into near proximity with tragedy and laughter: tragedy as the failure of any given tradition to repress effectively its negation; laughter as the experience of this negation as a positive joy in openness.

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1954) pp. 96-8.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Angus, “In Praise of Fire: Responsibility, Manifestation, Polemos, Circumspection” *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, Vol. 4 – 2004.