

ETHICS WITHOUT ONTOLOGY (Hilary Putnam)

Skepticism about Enlightenment

In the previous lecture I characterized philosophy as an enterprise that aims at what I called “reflective transcendence” -the act of standing back from conventional beliefs, received opinions, and even received practices, and asking; penetrating “Why should we accept this as right?”¹ At certain crucial moments in history, the result is a profound reevaluation of our ways of thinking, which we may call “enlightenment.” I cited Plato as a philosopher of enlightenment, in this sense, and I used as examples his criticism of religious fanaticism and his brilliant defense of the proposition that all offices in society ought to be open to women as well as men. The second enlightenment, in my list, was the one best known by that name, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movement associated with the names of Hobbes and Spinoza, Rousseau and Kant, Voltaire and the *philosophes*. I characterized that enlightenment as representing a faith in the powers of the new sciences, powers which I hoped to apply to thinking about social and moral problems, and a conception of society as a social contract. I said that although we certainly want to retain the idea of the consent of the governed, the second enlightenment had deeply faulty conceptions in many respects. I then described John Dewey's characterization of *both* wings of the Enlightenment, the rationalist wing and the empiricist wing, as deeply aprioristic, albeit in different ways, with the result that their program of thinking “scientifically” about society and man ended, in both cases, in metaphysical fantasies of various sorts. And I argued that the whole program of providing a metaphysical foundation for ethics and for society-for example, providing a reason why we ought to be social beings at all-mislocates the contribution that philosophy can and should make. I suggested that we need a “third enlightenment:” one whose conception of knowledge is much more fallibilistic than that of the seventeenth and eighteenth century-fallibilistic and antimetaphysical, but without lapsing into skepticism. I described Dewey as, in many ways, the philosopher who points us in the direction we need for such a third enlightenment.

When I remarked in the previous lecture that my talk of enlightenment might seem naive to poststructuralists, positivists, and “a host of others:” I wanted to make clear that I am a believer in progress, though not in the nineteenth-century sense of inevitable advance in ethics or in social

¹ The impulse to reflective transcendence is closely related to what Habermas calls “the emancipatory interest” in *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (translated into English as *Knowledge and Human Interests* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1971]).

life. What I believe in is the *possibility* of progress. To use a phrase of Habermas's of which Dewey would have approved, I believe that there have been *learning processes* in history, and that there *can* be further learning in the future.

I wish now to consider certain reasons that have been advanced for rejecting the very possibility of learning processes in social history and of rational persuasion in ethics. I shall not attempt to cover *all* the reasons that have been advanced by present-day and past philosophers; that would obviously be too vast an undertaking. In particular, I will not discuss the logical positivist views, which were influential for a large part of the twentieth century in convincing people that there could be no such thing as reasoning about ethical questions;² I have discussed these views amply in the past, and have treated them in detail again in a recent book.³ What I want to consider instead are two very contemporary sorts of reasons for rejecting all talk of “progress:” of “learning processes:” of “reasoning” in ethics, and the like--one associated with the label “postmodernism” and the other, more broadly, with such labels as “historicism” and “relativism.” But my aim will not be simply to “bash” so-called postmodern philosophy. Indeed, there are important things we can learn from the French philosophers-Foucault and Derrida-that I am going to criticize, and there are important analytic philosophers whom I will also criticize-in particular, I will be criticizing the recent writing of Bernard Williams, one of the most brilliant analytic philosophers I know, as well as some of the writing of my friend Richard Rorty, whose work reflects both analytic and “continental” influences, in the course of this lecture. (To tell the truth, I have never thought that classifying philosophy as “analytic” or “continental” is a good thing. But that would be a subject for a different occasion.)

“Postmodern” skepticism about reason-talk has many forms, but I will distinguish only two,

² This is a view that was popularized by A. J. Ayer (*Philosophical Essays* [London, 1959], p. 237) when he wrote that “what are accounted reasons for our moral judgments are reasons only in the sense that they determine attitudes.” Ayer was following Rudolf Carnap, who was willing to allow ethical judgments to have meaning only in the sense that “conceptions and images” can be associated with them--something which, Carnap said, is true of “any arbitrarily compounded series of words” (*The Unity of Science* [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Hubner, 1934], pp. 26-27). The logical positivists indeed believed that they had given a logical analysis of *all* possible kinds of cognitively meaningful judgments, and that analysis showed that value judgments could not have “cognitive meaning:” Today the positivist theory of cognitive meaning is generally recognized to have been a failure. (See my book cited in note 3 below for details.)

³ Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

one more apparent in the writing of Michel Foucault (although it is also present in Derrida's writing at times) and the other apparent in Derrida.⁴ I find Foucault extremely powerful when he analyzes the history of specific institutions, for example, the prison or the clinic. What he does in these philosophical histories of the prison or the clinic is to show us how talk of progress and of reason has been *abused*, how it has served as a rationalization for what he calls the “normalization,” that is to say, the bureaucratic administration, of people's lives.

Foucault is unquestionably right that the institution of the prison is not a very good one-and, I might add, especially not as it is used or rather abused in the United States today. However, one should remember that when the philosophers he criticized (e.g., Jeremy Bentham) argued for the “penitentiary” as a form of punishment (and, they hoped, rehabilitation), what they were opposing was, on the one hand, *torture*, and, on the other hand, *capital punishment* not, indeed, capital punishment as such, but capital punishment for the most trivial thefts, and even for juvenile offenders. When he criticizes the clinic, similarly, Foucault may perhaps be right that there are better methods of treating most patients than the clinic as it has come to be-and its present form does necessarily involve administration by a bureaucracy. Anarchist that he was, however, Foucault felt not the slightest responsibility for explaining in any detail what an *alternative* form of treatment--one that would be available to millions of people in huge societies--could be like, any more than he felt the slightest responsibility to suggest an alternative method of dealing with criminals something that many people have thought about (perhaps because it is impossible to think of an alternative that wouldn't still involve some degree of bureaucracy). Perhaps Foucault would have rejected the question I just posed; that is, he might have rejected the assumption that we need governments or administrations if we are to have societies with anything like the present number of people, and which live at anything like the present standard of either economic or physical security (bad as that admittedly is, in many places). The problem with “anarchist” critiques in general is that it is all too easy to criticize when you don't accept the responsibility to propose realistic alternatives to the institutions and practices that you criticize.

But Foucault's politics (or lack thereof) aside, his critique does contain important theoretical insights. “Archaeology” in Foucault's sense, is a history of ideas that takes the idea of conceptual structure seriously. To investigate the origins of our penal system, or the clinic, in this way is to look for systems of concepts, systems that have internal logical coherence because some of the concepts depend on others, and especially for systems that determine what Foucault calls an

⁴ I do not find this second form (described below as the idea of a bottomless regress of interpretations) in Foucault

“epistemology” -that is, systems that structure what counts as a problem, what as a possible solution, what as a justification. Although “analytic” philosophers still often write as if concepts were a-historic entities (which is exactly how they were conceived of by the fathers of analytic philosophy, Moore and Russell), there is no reason for their latter-day successors to deny that concepts have a history, and that conceptual analysis and historical analysis can fruitfully enrich each other-and indeed some fine analytic philosophers have been influenced by Foucault to attempt just such a project.⁵ What is disturbing about some of Foucault's work-particularly his early work-is that it seems to identify historical analysis of concepts with showing that the evolution of our systems of concepts is simply a matter of power struggles. The very possibility of concepts evolving as a result of what I have been calling *learning processes* seems to be missing in that work (although it is not inconceivable that toward the end of his life Foucault might have been open to it).

In a book I published about twenty years ago (*Reason, Truth, and History*), I expressed my worry by saying that in Foucault's way of thinking our present beliefs, for example our belief in the clinic as a way of administering medical treatment, are no more rational than the medieval belief in the Divine Right of Kings.⁶ My reply to this claim was to say the following: First, belief in the Divine Right of Kings was, in fact, an *irrational* belief even in the Middle Ages. Second, if, indeed, Foucault is right, and our belief that we need clinics-and likewise our belief that we need, if not the penitentiary, then some government-administered way of dealing with criminal offenders-is equally irrational, there is no reason why that could not be *shown*. To be sure, belief in progress has been abused-so, by the way, has the belief that progress is impossible! — it would be hard to find any belief about *anything* that has not been abused in some context or other. But this constitutes a *principled* threat to the power of intelligence to solve problems only if we see it as calling into question the very notion of rationality.

I spelled this out in *Reason, Truth, and History* by saying that it is and always was reasonable to doubt that the Church has privileged access to God's wishes; and if we reject the premise that the Church has privileged access to God's wishes, we will have very good reason to think the Divine Right of Kings was and is an irrational doctrine. I also pointed out that even believing Catholics now concede that the Church's support for monarchy in the Middle Ages was based as

⁵ An example is Ian Hacking's beautiful study, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Another is Arnold I. Davidson, "Structures and Strategies of Discourse: Remarks Toward a History of Foucault's Philosophy of Language;" in A. I. Davidson, ed., *Foucault and His Interlocutors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁶ *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 156-158.

much on political considerations as on revelation or sound theology. In short, the belief in the Divine Right of Kings lacks, and, I claim, always lacked, a rational justification.

As I reported in *Reason, Truth, and History*,⁷ I showed the pages in which I wrote this to someone who supported Foucault's view, and (I must admit, not to my surprise) my friend was outraged. He argued that *of course* belief in the Divine Right of Kings was “rational:’ that is, rational *in the Middle Ages*, given what Foucault would call the *jeu de vérité*, the “game of truth:’ that people played then.

Now, of course there is a *sense* of “rational” in which any view that has a well thought out and intelligent defense on the basis of the shared assumptions of a community can be called “rational” no matter what those shared assumptions might be; but *that* sense is not the normatively important one. To deny that there is a sense of “rational” that goes beyond the sense provided by whatever *jeu de vérité* we happen to be playing at a given moment in history-or to say, as Richard Rorty once did, that “I view warrant as a sociological matter, to be ascertained by observing the reception of *S*'s statement by her peers”⁸ -is simply to capitulate to a form of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is, indeed, an important issue to be faced, and I will turn to it in a little while.

But there is another kind of skepticism to be addressed, a kind that has been made famous by Derrida, which I also want to say something about. Two strains of thought in Derrida (actually, of course, more than two) converge on the idea that there is no getting outside of “texts.” (As he puts it, “The problematique of representation has collapsed:”)⁹ One strain is the idea of a bottomless regress of interpretations.

Deconstructionists claim that all perception and thought involve interpretation, and that every interpretation is susceptible to still further interpretation. Part of this is both true and important. If I see, for example, that a letter is written in blue ink, I employ a concept, the concept *blue ink*, which *could* require interpretation in *some* contexts. To use an example from a recent book by Charles Travis,¹⁰ I go to a stationery store and ask for a bottle of blue ink. I am given a bottle of black liquid. “I asked for blue ink” I protest. “Try it” the clerk tells me. I dip my

⁷ Ibid., pp. 157-158.

⁸ Rorty, “Putnam and the Relativist Menace;” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90, no. 9 (September 1993), p. 450.

⁹ For references see my *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 218, n. 22.

¹⁰ Charles Travis, *Unshadowed Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 129.

pen in the black liquid and attempt to write, and to my great surprise I find that the writing is a bright blue! Did the clerk then offer me blue ink? I shall have to think about how I understand “blue ink” then and there.

But this is not a possibility I *always* need to consider when I see that a letter is written in blue ink. Pragmatists say that further interpretation is only required (indeed, a Wittgensteinian would say *only makes sense*)¹¹ in certain contexts.

What deconstructionists do is treat *every* context as a context in which *everything* that is written, said, or thought requires interpretation (and indeed, to the extent that it is understood, is understood by way of interpretation). The only way that deconstructionists envisage of stopping an infinite regress of interpretations would be to claim that there are *self-interpreting* entities—Fregean Thoughts, or “concepts:” or Platonic “meanings:” or what have you. If one tries, in what I have just suggested is a pragmatist (and also Wittgensteinian) fashion, to distinguish between contexts in which the need for—indeed the very question of—interpretation arises and contexts in which it does not arise at all, deconstructionists are extremely skilled at providing examples of cases in which that distinction cannot be determinately drawn.

About all this, there are at least two things to be said. First, the sheer hubris of supposing that a few philosophical arguments, be they good or bad, of the kind that I have just described can really overthrow the very idea that thought has reference to objects outside of thought and language, or can overthrow the idea that we can speak of the meanings of things that are said and written, or the idea that notions of good and bad argument, that justification and reason and the like make sense—the very idea that all of this can be and has been overthrown by a handful of philosophical arguments seems to me an example of breathtaking arrogance.

I remember once, some years ago, I was having dinner with a group of graduate students at a large Midwestern university, one of whom was an enthusiastic Derridean. At that time, a favorite expression in deconstructionist circles was “ça se met en abîme:” *that puts itself in the abyss*, i.e., that deconstructs itself. I asked the young man, “Do you really think that *every* utterance deconstructs itself?” and he said,

“Yes.” I said, “A minute ago I said, ‘Pass the butter: Did *that* put itself in the abyss?’” He paused for a moment—I saw his Adam’s apple go up and down as he gulped—and then he bravely said, “Yes”.

Although I do not think it is right or fair to criticize Derrida himself for this, many professors

¹¹ See Travis, *Unshadowed Thought*, and Martin Stone, “Focusing the Law: What Legal Interpretation Is Not” in Andrei Marmor, ed., *Law and Interpretation: Essays in Legal Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 31-95.

nowadays (in the United States they are mostly to be found in literature departments, I have noticed) seem to think that Western logic and Western science were discovered to be unsound in Paris some time after 1960. Indeed, the very idea that there is a world out there was discovered to be unsound in Paris some time after 1960. For it to be even faintly reasonable to think that might be the case (oops! I just said “reasonable;” didn't I?), then the arguments in question would have to be better than they are—they would have, at the very least, not to be *obviously* vulnerable to criticism. In fact, both arguments are terribly weak. From the fact that a distinction cannot be drawn in all cases, it does not follow in any way that it is not valid where it can be drawn. To suppose the contrary is as if I were to put someone before you who has fuzz on his head, and we agreed that it was indeterminate whether this person should be called *bald* or *not bald*, and we were then to conclude that we must scrap the distinction between bald and not bald. It is noteworthy that Wittgenstein, whose texts some deconstructionists have lately taken to quoting in support of their views, explicitly attacks the idea that words that are not clearly defined in all cases are worthless. For example, in *Philosophical Investigations* we find:

§88. If I tell someone “Stand roughly here” —may not this explanation work perfectly? And cannot every other one fail to?

I note, by the way, that in a carefully argued paper Chris Mortensen has criticized in detail Derrida's arguments in his celebrated essay “Plato's Pharmacy and Derrida's Drugstore,”¹² and in particular he has documented Derrida's extensive reliance on precisely the mode of argument I just criticized, a mode of argument which even the normally sympathetic Richard Rorty rejects as depending on the assumption “that unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise it isn't really a distinction at all.” (Rorty is here quoting Searle, who, he says, “is, I think, right.”) Rorty also says that many of Derrida's arguments are “awful” (although he characteristically claims that this doesn't really matter very much).¹³ Even though the “assumption” Rorty cites is one that Derrida would undoubtedly reject if asked pointblank “Do you believe this?”, Mortensen and Rorty are right in thinking that at crucial points Derrida's arguments depend upon it.

¹² Christopher Mortensen, “Plato's Pharmacy and Derrida's Drugstore;” *Language and Communication*, 20 (2000), pp. 329-346.

¹³ See “Deconstruction and Circumvention” in Rorty's *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, vol. 2 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 93-94, n. 12.

The metaphysical idea of a bottomless regress of interpretations which figures in Derrida's writing seems to me even weaker because it ignores two fundamental pragmatist insights, namely: (1) that interpretation is not something that is called for in every case, but only in circumstances where there is doubt as to what a text means or what a person means by her words; and (2) there is neither need for nor possibility of a perfectly precise rule which says which are those circumstances. As Wittgenstein writes:

§84. I said that the application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules. For what does a game look like that is everywhere bounded by rules? Whose rules never let a doubt creep in, but stuff up all the cracks where it might? — Can't we imagine a rule determining the application of a rule, and a doubt that it removes-and so on?

And notice how the section continues:

But that is not to say that we are in doubt because it is possible for us to *imagine* a doubt. I can easily imagine someone always doubting before he opened his front door whether an abyss did not yawn behind it; and making sure about it before he went through the door (and he might on some occasion prove to be right)-but that does not make me doubt in the same case.

In short: we don't need a “rule” to take care of a “doubt” that is wholly without justification!

In spite of such statements on Wittgenstein's part, some deconstructionists nevertheless see his rule-following discussion as *supporting* the regress of interpretations argument; but as Martin Stone has shown, the whole point of Wittgenstein's discussions is precisely to show, to use Wittgenstein's own words in §201, “There is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases. Hence there is an inclination to say: every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term 'interpretation' to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another.” As Stone writes, “The paradoxical regress of interpretation is to be avoided, in Wittgenstein's view, by dropping the assumption that causes all the trouble: namely that one could not follow a rule unless one first attached some interpretation to it.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Stone, “Focusing the Law” p. 55. For a more detailed analysis of “deconstructionist” readings of Wittgenstein and a comparison/contrast of Wittgenstein and Derrida, see also Stone's “Wittgenstein and Deconstruction” in Alice Crary and Rupert Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Although I have been criticizing Derrida--and even more, a certain reception of Derrida--let me emphatically declare that I have no intention of reading him out of the profession of philosophy, in the manner of his more enthusiastic “analytic” opponents. In spite of all the exaggeration and “overkill” I find in his writing, one can still learn from Derrida--certainly, one can learn that the language of enlightenment, the language of reason, even the language of morality should often be distrusted. Derridean critique is *sometimes* in place. The important thing is to perceive *when* a text should be read “deconstructively” and *when* this is not the way a text should be read. We needn't view Derrida as somebody from whom we can't learn anything. But at this time it is important to say that we needn't and we mustn't view Derrida as somebody whose most radical claims have to be believed. And yet world-historical significance has been attached to conclusions reached by arguments this dubious!¹⁵ I do not deny for one moment that Derrida is a significant philosopher, but I have to admit that my reaction to the chatter about “postmodernism” as a whole is that it is sad to see so much clamor about stuff so lacking in intellectual substance.

Finally, I turn to cultural relativism. This comes in two versions. The more extreme or “industrial-strength” version is represented by Richard Rorty, and the moderate version is represented by another famous philosopher, Bernard Williams. I will say very little here about Rorty's industrial strength cultural relativism. (I am aware, of course, that Rorty denies being a cultural relativist, which is why I spoke before of relativism *or* historicism; Rorty's position, in the terminology of one of my critical essays long ago,¹⁶ is properly described as a form of cultural *imperialism* rather than cultural relativism; however, with respect to the concept of *justification* he is an explicit relativist.) Although with respect to *truth*, Rorty's position is that what is true and false is determined by the norms of “our” (“wet liberal”) culture, he is willing to say that what is *justified* to believe in other cultures is decided by the sociological facts about those cultures. By using here the phrase “sociological fact” in explaining Rorty's position, I have flagged one of the respects in which I think his view is self-refuting: I think that Rorty's position presupposes a naive realism about sociological facts, norms of “our” culture, etc., which is contrary to the position as a whole. (For those who are interested in the details, I recommend the exchange between us in the recently published Festschrift for Rorty edited by Robert Brandom.)¹⁷

Bernard Williams's latest statement of his views is set out in a lecture replying to some of my

¹⁵ For instance, the term “Postmodernism” itself, as if this were an epoch on a par with Modernism or Romanticism or Enlightenment.

¹⁶ However, I mistakenly classified it as “cultural relativism” in that essay: “Why Realism Can't Be Naturalized” in my *Realism and Reason*, vol. 3 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 230-240.

¹⁷ *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

own criticisms recently published in the British journal *Philosophy*.¹⁸ This essay is titled “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline,” and it reflects throughout the same concern with achieving a reflective understanding of the history of the subject that lay behind my previous lecture. It clearly aspires both to praise and to exhibit what I have called “reflective transcendence”; and certainly Williams does not believe that justification is just “a sociological matter, to be ascertained by observing the reception of S's statement by her peers:’ as Rorty does. The sciences, in particular, Williams sees as converging to what he calls an “absolute” conception of the world, a conception which reveals (to the maximum extent possible) how things are in themselves, independently of human “perspectives.” This makes it all the more sad that when it comes to just the issues that I have been discussing here, we find him driven to views surprisingly similar in certain respects to Rorty's. Here is the background:

Bernard Williams, as I do, thinks that it is important to reflect on what he calls “a historical story of how these concepts rather than others came to be ours.”¹⁹ Let us look at the passage:

If we ask why we use some concepts of this [political and ethical] kind rather than others — rather than, say, those current in an earlier time—we may deploy arguments which claim to justify our ideas against those others; ideas of equality and equal rights, for instance, against ideas of hierarchy. Alternatively, we may reflect on an historical story, of how these concepts rather than others came to be ours: a story (simply to give it a label) of how the modern world and its special expectations came to replace the *ancien regime*. But then we reflect on the relation of this story to the arguments that we deploy against the earlier conceptions, and we realize that the story is the history of those forms of argument themselves: the forms of argument, call them liberal forms of argument, are a central part of the outlook that we accept.

If we consider how these forms of argument came to prevail, we can indeed see them as having won, but not necessarily as having won an argument. For liberal ideas to have won an argument, the representatives of the *ancien regime* would have had to have shared with the nascent liberals a conception of something that the argument was about, and not just in the obvious sense that it was about the way to live or the way to order society. They would have had to agree that there was some aim, of reason or freedom or whatever, which liberal ideas served better or of which they were a better expression, and there is not much reason, with a change as radical as this, to think that they did agree about this, at least until late in the process. The relevant ideas of freedom, reason, and so on were themselves involved in the change. If in this sense the liberals did not win an argument, then the explanations of how liberalism came to prevail—that is to say, among other things, how these came to be

¹⁸ Bernard Williams, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline;’ *Phi losophy*, 75 (2000), pp. 477--495

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

our ideas-are not vindicatory.²⁰

Contrast this pessimistic appraisal of the possibility of giving what Williams calls a “vindicatory” history of the evolution of the liberal outlook (of what I called in the previous lecture the second and third enlightenments) with his optimistic view of the possibility of giving a vindicatory history of scientific discovery, expressed a couple of pages earlier:²¹

There is of course a real question of what it is for a history to be a history of discovery. One condition of its being so lies in a familiar idea, which I would put like this: the later theory, or (more generally) outlook, makes sense of itself, and of the earlier outlook, and of the transition from the earlier to the later, in such terms that both parties (the holders of the earlier outlook, and the holders of the later) have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement. I shall call an explanation which satisfies this condition *vindicatory*. In the particular case of the natural sciences, the later theory typically explains in its own terms the appearances which supported the earlier theory, and, furthermore, the earlier theory can be understood as a special or limited case of the former.²²

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 487--488.

²¹ Ibid., p. 486.

²² By the way, the philosophy of science in this passage is naïve: if quantum mechanics “explains” phenomena, it does so in a sense of “explain” that would have been as alien to the ways of thinking of a classical physicist as talk of “the rights of man” would have been to someone living in the *ancien regime*. Quantum mechanics has no single accepted interpretation to the present day. Thus it does not (at present) “explain” a single phenomenon in the classic sense of providing a dynamical picture which accounts for it. What it does instead is *redescribe phenomena in terms of structures which are utterly abstract-not* structures in space-time, but such set-theoretic objects as projection operators on Hilbert spaces. And the sense in which the classical theories it replaces are “limiting cases” of quantum mechanics is likewise novel (treating Poisson brackets as limiting cases of entirely different mathematical expressions which have formal similarities to them). In fact, we could write, mimicking Williams, “For quantum-mechanical ideas to have won an argument, classical physicists would have had to have shared with the nascent quantum physicists a conception of something that the argument was about, and not just in the obvious sense that it was about physical phenomena. They would have had to agree that there was some aim, of explanation or correct description or whatever, which quantum mechanical ideas served better or of which they were a better expression, and there is not much reason, with a change as radical as this, to think that they did agree about this, at least until late in the process. The relevant ideas of explanation, description, and so on were themselves

Williams here isn't simply defining a technical term ("vindicatory"), whose meaning he is free to stipulate as he pleases. What he is offering is an account of *rational justification*, and it is clear that the only alternative he sees to a "vindicatory" account of how we came to believe something is an account which simply gives up the idea that changing our beliefs was a learning process at all. We see this, for example, when he says that "we *must* attend [to the question of the existence of a vindicatory history] if we are to know what reflective attitude to take to our own conceptions."²³ The passage continues:

For one thing the answer to the question whether there is a history of our conceptions that is vindicatory (if only modestly so) makes a difference to what we are doing in saying, if we do say, that the earlier conceptions were wrong. In the absence of vindicatory explanations, while you can of course say that they were wrong—who is to stop you? - the content of this is likely to be pretty thin. It conveys only the message that the earlier outlook fails by arguments the point of which is that such outlooks should fail by them. It is a good question whether a tune as thin as this is worth whistling at all.

So the real question is whether one *can* see the development of enlightenment as a learning process, and Williams is quite right to say, as he does two pages later,

To some extent this is one version of a problem that has recurred in European thought since historical self-consciousness struck deep roots in the early nineteenth century: a problem of reflection and commitment, or of an external view of one's beliefs as opposed to an internal involvement with them—a problem, as it might be called, of historicist weariness and alienation.²⁴

In order to bring the issue down to earth, let us consider again the example I used a little while ago, namely our coming to see the arguments for the Divine Right of Kings as bad arguments. The medieval Church defended the Divine Right of Kings with an appeal—an appeal in which, I think, any good Talmudist would have had no difficulty in exposing all kinds of holes—to the story in the Bible of how God (reluctantly and angrily!) conceded to the Israelites' wish to have a king (so that they could be like the other nations!). Now, it is essential to the outlook of all three enlightenments that although an enlightened person can certainly be religious, an enlightened person does not take every sentence of the Bible (or, in Plato's case, of Greek mythology) as

involved in the change."

²³ Williams, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline" p. 488.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 490.

authoritative on either cosmological or political matters. (Indeed, the rabbis of the Talmud were already enlightened in this sense.)²⁵ Moreover-and this is the beginning of what I called the “pragmatist enlightenment”-enlightened persons no longer take the opinions of philosophers who claim to have “apriori proofs” concerning matters of fact or of politics as authoritative. As Peirce put it, in his great essay “The Fixation of Belief,” we have learned that the Method of Authority and the Method of What is Agreeable to Reason are bad ways of fixing belief. And Peirce was quite willing to describe this discovery as “in Bacon's phrase, a true induction,”²⁶ that is to say, an illustration of the very scientific method we have come to valorize. For pragmatists, the rejection of every form of fundamentalism and the rejection of every form of apriorism are essential to a proper understanding of what a learning process *is*.

Now let us recall Williams's words that I quoted earlier: “For liberal ideas to have won an argument, the representatives of the *ancien regime* would have had to have shared with the nascent liberals a conception of something that the argument was about, and not just in the obvious sense that it was about the way to live or the way to order society.” Williams then identified what they would have had to agree on, namely, “that there was some aim, of reason or freedom or whatever, which liberal ideas served better or of which they were a better expression,” and he added “and there is not much reason, with a change as radical as this, to think that they did agree about this, at least until late in the process.” But this is stacking the cards with a vengeance!

Rather than it being the case that people *started* with ideas like “freedom” (in the modern sense), or “reason” (in the modern sense), and then moved *from* those principles to the rejection of the Divine Right of Kings, there is every reason to think the reverse; that is, to say that people perceived that reliance on the Bible, as interpreted by the Church, with respect to astronomical matters was a bad idea (in part because the new astronomy was slowly but surely producing results which-as Galileo showed-were difficult to square with Ptolemaic astronomy, which was the astronomy that the Church accepted because it preserved what the Church saw as essential parts of the biblical description). In addition, the Catholic Church had exploited its privileged right to say what the proper interpretation of the Bible was supposed to be to such an extent as to produce a many-sided reaction, the reaction we know as Protestantism. Once people were

²⁵ See Menachem Fisch, *Rational Rabbis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

²⁶ In “The Fixation of Belief” collected in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 223-247. The quotation is from p. 242 (§383).

allowed (or allowed themselves the freedom) to discuss alternative understandings of the Bible, the whole idea that the Bible in any way obviously and clearly mandates that every society must have a king, or that if a society does have a king, then that king rules by Divine Right, was seen to be extremely dubious. It is *after* the Divine Right of Kings has been questioned, that is, when people have already begun to search for alternative conceptions “about the way to live or the way to order society,” that modern ideas of freedom and reason arise as people begin to formulate the conceptions which will guide them when they live in societies which no longer have absolute monarchs-and, of course, once monarchy came into question, then aristocracy was soon likewise questioned.

Williams gives great weight to the thought that such arguments and conceptions would not have convinced “representatives of the *ancien regime*”. But neither did they convince representatives of the Church in the case of Galileo! What really leads Williams astray, I think, is his too limited conception of the choice we face. Williams's choice is simply to see what I have called the Enlightenment (and what I have called the “pragmatist enlightenment” as well, to the extent that it prevails) as simply “contingent,” a notion that Rorty too exploits,²⁷ which is why Williams thinks it necessary to distinguish himself from Rorty by rejecting Rorty's valorization of “irony.” Thus Williams writes,

In fact, as it seems to me, once one goes *far enough* in recognizing contingency, the problem to which irony is supposed to provide the answer does not arise at all... The supposed problem comes for the idea that a vindictory history of our outlook is what we would really like to have, and the discovery that liberalism, in particular (but the same is true of any outlook), has the kind of contingent history that it does have is a disappointment, which leaves us with at best a second best. But, once again, why should we think that? Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours. We are no less contingently formed than the outlook is, and the formation is significantly the same. Our outlook and we are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of what is indeed another scientific illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective.²⁸

²⁷ E.g., in Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁸ Williams, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline” pp. 490-491.

Williams sees only two possible positions: *either* the position that he defends, which is to see what I have called “enlightenment” (and what he calls “liberal”) values as *merely* “contingent” products of a particular history, but to celebrate the supposed fact that since we are equally “contingent,” and we and those values are made for each other, there is no problem (for us) in accepting them (a position which Rorty also espouses in many places²⁹ — “irony” is not at all times Rorty’s stance) *or*, on the other hand, a position which would indeed be “scientific,” namely the position that we can search for, and that it is “our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective.” What is missing in this dichotomy is precisely the idea that characterizes my pragmatist “enlightenment”: the idea that there is such a thing as the *situated* resolution of political and ethical problems and conflicts (of what Dewey calls “problematical situations”), and that claims concerning evaluations of-and proposals for the resolution of-problematical situations can be more and less *warranted* without being *absolute*. Situated resolutions of problems always require ideas; but they do not require ideas which are “free of contingent historical perspective.” Dewey stressed that problematical situations are contingent and their resolutions are likewise contingent; but there is still a difference, an all-important difference, between *thinking* that a claim concerning the resolution of a situation is a warranted claim and its actually *being* warranted. What is missing in Williams’s entire discussion is the possibility of a view like Dewey’s. What is missing is the very possibility of pragmatism. •

²⁹ Notably in “Solidarity or Objectivity?” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).