From the Urban Horizon to Logical Space: Notes On Contemporary Pedagogical Philosophy

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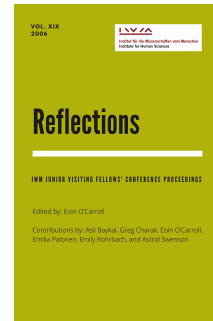
I

The first part of this essay attempted to portray an extraordinary, though often overlooked continuity in the history of social philosophy.[1] Understood as an attempt to dissolve intrigue through the clearing of occluded horizons, we compared the social-philosophical attempts of ancient Athens and turn-of-the-century Vienna by describing the affinities between reflection and reduction.

In both cases, we cited the crucial moment of an individual's philosophical conversion over against his inherited conscious horizon. The aura of the received is dimmed when the imagination assumes a critical, higher standpoint, and in this movement social philosophy proceeds as an irreverent response to illegitimate authority, opportunistic distraction and nomological chatter. As Socrates put it, one is to stand in the same relationship to the law as the legislator who wrote it. Pseudo-necessity, along with the myopia and injustice that it supports, is to be overcome by the education of possibility – which is to say by the transition from passive to active intellect.

At the same time, confronted with the space opened up by the question, the distance created by irony and analysis, the individual seeks new goals guided by the consideration of and care for her own mortality. The search is for an active horizon not associated with social domination or programmatic insincerity, and meaning is sought by developing and exercising one's creative powers, in quieter places, with respect to truth, beauty and compassion. The individual becomes a witness to human dignity and an opponent of social enmity dedicated to the preservation of an integral public space. Taken as a whole, this philosophical conversion has been described as a *Versammlung*, a "collecting" of oneself within oneself, and the heretical responsibility that it occasions has been the subject of much of Western philosophy, theology and literature.

In our historical study, we noted that this project of conversion, while unified in the philosophical works of Plato, had become strangely divided within modern European philosophy, including in the split between phenomenology and positivism in the first half of the 20th century. It seemed that a path to reconciliation was well framed by Robert Musil, whose protagonist Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities* desperately challenges pseudo-reality by calling for the establishment of a "World Secretariat of Precision and Soul." Musil thus offers a unified, distinctly modern vision of the ancient ideal of social philosophy – that is, one that outlines a viable, post-Kantian transit between the primordial and the positive. Insofar as his vision went unnoticed in the last century, our task today is to talk about the prospects for extending philosophical conversion, and humanities education generally, in the face of the Technicolor horizon of pop and the information age.

So what about postmodern *Versammlung*? It was implied in the last essay, though not defended, that today we stand unconsciously closer to social philosophy; that an innate will to translate and understand is latently strengthened through our early exposure to a distinct kind of popular *theoria* as mass image. This claim is probably not controversial. But if it is widely agreed, for example, that the Internet renders high-pressure ideology all but impossible, our question is *why* this is the case, and thus what we can do both to make sure this assumption holds, and to preclude a general, low-pressure ideology from filling the vacuum.

Our answer to this question of "why" is part historical and part phenomenological. The historical component deals with the consequences of the failure of early 20th century philosophy to achieve the kind of pedagogical unity implicit in its original spirit and intentions, and embodied in Musil's vision described above. Historically, philosophical movements that lose their pedagogical spirit quickly sediment into fixed doctrine. Metaphysical parable aimed at the suggestion of dispositional form becomes metaphysical structure. Thus, for example, out of the womb of Greek philosophy develops Roman law, Christian theology, Scholastic philosophy and Aristotelian physics. We will be concerned with the way in which modern thought splits into epistemological and Romantic tendencies in attempting to appropriate these horizons, and thus the fate of the pedagogical Good after it has been divided into the given and the noble. More specifically, we will be interested in the unique nature of the *structure* left over by the pedagogical exhaustion of 20th century logical positivism – considered as a philosophy of the given – and its relationship to the contemporary experience of knowledge and education.

By shedding light on the historical failure of epistemology and Romanticism to reconcile themselves in the 20th century, by conceding that it has somehow not become clear that sobriety is essentially ecstatic, and that ecstasy has become necessarily responsible, we search for a new ground for pedagogical philosophy amidst the ashes of a fruitless struggle. Still essentially concerned with nomological chatter, our hypothesis will be that a legacy of acute philosophical attentiveness to clarity, cognition and the logical form of theory presentation, when united with the unprecedented, contemporary advancements

in media technology, has radically altered the educational and cultural experience of chatter – we face, quite literally, a *visual Gerede*, an optical chatter, that is distinct from what has come before it.

From a phenomenological perspective, we will consider how such a horizon of visual chatter might impress upon the souls of young people. The instantiation of prejudice – of the visceral type-intuition of named qualities – requires an aura and authority strong enough to break the natural will to translate. We thus recall Socrates' attempted interruption of the work of fathers and sophists, his goal of clearing the *urban horizon* of ancient Athens of conventional wisdom and *Realpolitik*. But what has become of the urban horizon, and the aura of parochial demagoguery generally, in the information age of visual chatter? The aesthetic theory of Walter Benjamin will help us to answer these questions by introducing the condition of a widespread shift to *cognitive* type-intuition motivated by the effect of the camera and the glossy image on modern consciousness.

From these answers we will make a number of suggestions concerning the prospects of philosophical conversion and humanities education today. These suggestions can hopefully be applied with respect to a diverse group of phenomena including transatlantic relations, the shape of American business education, the educational violence of fundamentalism, the international distribution of wealth and finally trends in cognitive neuroscience and literary theory.

II

In order to best understand the consequences of the pedagogical failures of early 20th century philosophy, and thus its sedimentation into structure, we must first briefly review the nature of its original aims. We mentioned above the latent unity in the projects of positivism and phenomenology, and in the historical study this included a shared notion of objectivity as communication and cooperative activity. This understanding is consistent with a broader modern call to engaging the present expressed, albeit with distinct connotation, in Marx's materialism, Neurath's naturalism and indeed Heidegger's "being-in-the-world." Modern man is to bridge the subject-object divide occasioned by political liberalism, idealistic science and capitalistic exchange, and thus close the false distance that alienates him from the world and from his fellow man.

This project abounds with the exaltation of life over the formulation of absolute law. According to Mach, "science proceeds out of life," as it does for Husserl within the *Lifeworld*. For Nietzsche, all inherited morality is to be re-evaluated under the "lens of life." In all cases, occluded nomological horizons are dissolved amidst a recollection and acceptance of ultimate cosmological ignorance and innocence – thus both the modern epistemological conversation about scientific knowledge and the Romantic discourse on meaning, develop an *education ofpossibility* – one positive and one primordial.

In the historical essay, we identified this dual pedagogy with the two reductions advocated by positivism and phenomenology, and thus with the scientific world conception and the total phenomenological attitude. In discussing the synthesis of these movements, we imagine the modern reconciliation of the given and the noble, of science and art –

perhaps we recall Boltzmann's celebration of Schiller, or the life and work of Boltzmann himself; we propose an answer to the unresolved questions about the relationship between verification, choice and the sublime. However, given the absence of such a reconciliation historically, we turn to positivism and evaluate the legacy of its eventual, structural sedimentation on contemporary cognition and public discourse.

There is no space here to review in detail the emergence of the "given" and the "fact" as normative categories in the history of philosophy, political theory and natural science. Suffice it to say that in a campaign against illegitimate authority and groundless superstition, all claims to absolute knowledge were to be measured directly against the content of (empirical) experience. When synthesized with a conception of natural rights, these ideas were to secure science and human dignity towards the realization of social justice; and so humankind, according to August Comte, emerges out of its theological and metaphysical stages, and into the so-called "real" stage. Understanding the nature and fate of this real stage is essential.

And so we turn to the re-manifestations of these ideas within 20th century positivism. This movement distinguished itself epistemologically, as a critique of the absolutism and naïveté within modern, Enlightenment science, and pedagogically, as a campaign for sobriety, rationality, and the extension of education and opportunity in a time of festering intrigue, pseudoscience and ideology.

Epistemologically, by exposing and exploring the roles of idealization, analogy and simplification in the natural sciences, thinkers like Pierre Duhem came to suggest that "all physical laws are provisional because they are both approximate and symbolic," and Ernst Mach re-described each inherited scientific structure as *"eine in Worte gefasste unvollkommene Erkenntnis,"* – "an incomplete knowledge fastened into words." In this way, 20th century philosophy of science embraces the education of possibility by understanding scientific theory as a series of models, or pictures, of the world, each emphasizing different aspects of a single, inexhaustibly rich and manifold reality. Thus a determined agnosticism encourages a sense of objectivity as cooperation and *translation* – a spirit embodied in 20th century positivist encyclopedism. In this context the neutral monism of Ernst Mach, a conception widely attacked in the last century as idealistic, solipsistic or even reactionary, proves rather to be an integral pedagogical presentation that remains agnostic as to "underlying" metaphysical structure, and instead appropriates metaphysics as disclosure, allowing the face of reality itself to be altered as determined by our form of address.

III

With this general background, we can now address logical space and conventionalism. In a way, these ideas represented the critical, structural moment for the positivist education of possibility – either they would be successfully deployed pedagogically and socially, or become sedimented into encounterable dogma.

Wittgenstein's conception of logical space appears in his first major work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Wittgenstein, along with an alternative, neo-Kantian influence, brings to Machean positivism the *logical* component so typical of modern German-speaking philosophy. Wittgenstein's project is itself in fact very much in the spirit of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In that work, Kant attempted to demonstrate that a transcendental logic orders our empirical experience in such a way as to make the claims of mathematical natural science necessary, thus rendering knowledge objective. We might say that Wittgenstein, like Kant, was determined to express the logical structure of the world; not through a logic of cognition, however, but rather through an analysis of the logical structure of language, and specifically, that of assertions or propositions. Wittgenstein's account of the foundations of knowledge is consequently one that better reflects 20th century philosophy of science.

To understand why this is the case we need to fully grasp the concept of logical space. From a logical point of view, according to Wittgenstein, a proposition, considered itself in isolation, is a picture of reality, a picture that attempts to "model" reality in a faithful manner. To be successful in its depiction, that is, for a proposition to be true, the relational structure of the elements of the proposition must match the relational structure of the referenced objects arranged in a *Sachverhalt*, a "state of affairs." Drawing on a new formal logic – the propositional calculus and theory of relations developed mainly by Russell and Frege – Wittgenstein is committed to achieving a rigorous, logical explanation of the meaning and objectivity of assertions by making it clear that what is communicated in a proposition is not qualitative psychological content, but rather relational-structural form. We can never know if my experience of the book or the table is exactly like yours, but if I assert that "the book is on the table," this assertion generates a viable, structural picture of reality which that can be communally verified against an existing state of affairs. Logical space is simply made up of the sum-total of all propositions that generate viable pictures, and which therefore have "meaning" and can be compared to reality; whether or not they turn out to be true is another matter. Thus, the proposition "the table is on the book," though probably false, occupies a place in logical space, while "the whole book is both red and green" does not – not because it is false, but because it is meaningless, a violation of the structural logic of color – we simply cannot picture it.

All this might seem silly or superfluous, but in fact it fits in very well with both the epistemological and pedagogical projects of 20th century positivism as described above. With the idea of logical space, Wittgenstein creates a middle zone between our assertions and the world; a kind of explicit, positive and therefore collectively valid imagination – we might think of a classroom blackboard, for example. This space is an explicit representation of the normal processes through which we communicate the structural meaning of our assertions to one another; how we accomplish discourse as *apophansis*, a sincere "shedding light upon," or exhibiting of, our thoughts.

The epistemological consequences of this zone are as follows: though we may give to the structure and symbols "on the blackboard" certain rules that regulate their use and interaction, and although the situation depicted on the blackboard can be compared to a

state of affairs within reality at any given time, those rules bear no determinative force over reality itself. In other words, there is no necessity other than logical necessity, and thus Wittgenstein's suggestion that "the whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena." The flexibility associated with an understanding of scientific theories as pictures of reality is thus here given its purest form, and the education of possibility is re-expressed as the ability to rearrange structures in logical space, a kind of explicit dialectic in the collective, positive imagination.

Pedagogically, these ideas encourage care, discipline and precision in our assertions. *Sachlichkeit,* or "sobriety," was an exceptional mode in and around Vienna during World War I. And just as Socrates engaged the insincerity of the sophists, modern positivism was determined to stymie the violent influence of ideology and pseudoscience by attacking the vagueness, and thus the meaninglessness, of their assertions. If "the whole book is both red and green" is meaningless, so too is a claim, for example, that a particular "race" is "morally inferior." Indeed, all value judgments are rendered meaningless by Wittgenstein's portrayal, and his most extreme of fact-value splits, when understood within its historical context, appears as a trenchant ethical-critical model comparable in spirit to many others of the time, for example the Bauhaus movement in architecture. Our question is what happens when such critical content is taken out of its historical context, and transported, for example, to postwar America? What happens when these models are not elected in a critical response, but rather "encountered"? Can the "real stage" be simply occupied?

We must also consider the legacy of conventionalism when asking these questions. The successful formulation of viable, non-Euclidean geometries in the 19th century helped philosopher-scientists like Henri Poincaré in their exploration of the role of convention, hypothesis and definition in modern scientific theory. In time, an enriched understanding of axiomatics embraced the education of possibility by pointing out a space of free choice at the foundation of all deductive, theoretical systems. Thus, a *stipulative a priori* replaces an absolute one, and we are encouraged to collectively review and assess the basic assumptions that bind together the inferences of our total worldviews. In natural science, the goals of simplicity and power of explanation might guide such choices, but pedagogically minded positivists like Otto Neurath quickly saw another, social, potential in such a conception. Conventionalism seemed to provide a natural-scientific foundation for social paradigm shift. For indeed there must also lie some basic assumptions and choices at the foundations of our social systems – our economy, for example – which are independent of those systems, whose motives are "auxilliary." Neurath thus tried to help his contemporaries to choose the shift to a more humane, planned, moneyless economy. Our interest, however, is in what happens when the non-ironic study of axiomatics and theoretical structure loses its focus on auxiliary motive. What becomes of conventionalism without choice?

IV

The answers suggested in the following must be understood within the context of the intellectual migration of logical positivism from Europe to England and the United States before and during World War II. As Michael Friedman has put it, there occurred within this time period a literal "parting of the ways" between positivism and phenomenology, one embodied today in the split between so-called Anglo-analytic and European continental philosophy. The world secretariat for precision and soul was disbanded, and contemporary, transatlantic political attacks aimed on the one side at superficiality and calculation, and at obscurantist sophistication and intrigue on the other, are mirrored blow for blow in academic philosophy. Unfortunately, neither the positive call for clarity and progress nor the primordial call for recollection and return are significant when ripped from their natural harmony. It is probably unfortunate that logical positivism ended up in America – Weimar was certainly the worst place for Heidegger. But although we cannot here trace out the path of one-sided primordialism, especially the key phenomena of self-affirmation and collective return essential to both modern fascism and contemporary fundamentalism, we can now turn to the structural legacy of positivism in American education and culture.

The basic claim is that the formal-logical and structural-theoretical emphasis of early 20 th century philosophy of science offered a platform for the accelerated and *explicit*, conceptual ordering of various aspects of educational and cultural experience in the United States over the last half century. An explicit schema of ordered content, like a rigid opposition, is a concern of social philosophy because it offers the possibility of myopia in thought and communication. Assertions of questionable intention can make appeal *to* the schema, and uninterrogated belief systems can dangle *from* it. Social philosophy attends to such matters in every theoretical age, for as Emil Lask wrote in his "Theory of Knowledge" in 1912, "reflection on the complication of structure shows itself as the only exact way" out of oppositions.

We recall that Wittgenstein's emphasis on relational structure in his theory of propositions was relatively neutral about the content at the nodes of a relational nexus, be they names in a proposition or objects in a state of affairs. Content neutrality is indeed a trademark of 20th century logistic It seems quite easy to imagine concepts of various forms occupying these positions, and so a shift from a concern about the care with which we make assertions about reality, to a rigorous attentiveness to the structural arrangement of a particular "theory" – from a *Sachverhalt to a Begriffschema* – from a state of affairs to a conceptual schema. Similarly, in considering the fate of the investigation of theoretical structure associated with conventionalism; in the absence of emphasis on the a priori element of choice, these considerations become enmeshed in the deductive inferences and internal relationships within a system or web of concepts. These "holistic" structures are then identified as disciplines, language games, discourses and so on. There are two main concerns with this presentation.

The first is the widespread attribution of theoretical structure to non-exact "fields" in education. This goes beyond the traditional debate over the essential differences between natural and social sciences, and indeed is distinct even from the work of someone like Nancy Cartwright, who, by questioning the attempts of economics to mold itself in the

image of physics, has dealt precisely with the problems of attributing rigorous, deductive form to mundane concepts. Rather, we are thinking of the advent of structure in certain pre-professional disciplines in American universities, namely communications and business, though of course the pedagogical consequences of economics, psychology and game theory, for example, are also of central interest. It seems that an attentiveness to the content and development of these disciplines could prove invaluable for pedagogical philosophy.

Our second concern, as always with structure, is that of intellectual and spiritual passivity. Inherited structure encourages acceptance over appropriation. Holism and pseudo-science facilitate the structural abdication of the pedagogical essence of positivism — the re-activation of meaningful horizons through genealogy, reflection, and inter-disciplinary translation is overshadowed by the "results" of non-ironic investigations into the shape of independent conceptual landscapes. This shift undermines the centrality of social justice in inquiry, and helps produce a new kind of occluded horizon that is our central theme.

Indeed, the nature of inherited spiritual obstructions and intellectual distraction is, in part, unique today to the extent that theoretical content and nomological chatter are more often perceived, quite literally, than fully occupied. The positivist fascination with the visual field is well known – how else could behaviorism have been conceived? – and when aligned with the formal-structural ordering of the content of an expanding number of "disciplines" in logical space, the phenomenological mode of squinting becomes prevalent in a new form. In the last paper, we defined squinting as the mode appropriate to science, one that seeks out a certain form of positive necessity through rigorous observation and measurement. This mode fully realizes itself only in concert with an individual and communal meditation on meaning and goals. However, it can of course prevail in the absence of such a dialogue, and such is the case with a widespread, non-critical encounter of prescribed content in logical space. The cultural analogue of this educational situation is of course pop, or the Technicolor horizon, and indeed the predominant shape of collective distraction today makes Plato's cave allegory seem more of a prescient pedagogical prediction than a diagnosis of the ancient Athenian *proteron*. Our claim is that amidst such circumstances the path to philosophical conversion is significantly cleared – that explicit analysis, when it has failed to liberate, has often been able to at least neutralize – that squinting is different from scarring. To understand this pedagogical appraisal of visual chatter, of the lowest pressure of all ideologies, we say a few words about pop.

The main thesis of Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" is that the proliferation of popular images, in the form of film and illustrated periodicals, have performed a revolutionary role with respect to art. The work of art is no longer a sacred article whose presence is required for the performance of cult ritual. Rather, as the aura of the work is diluted through its mass reproduction, it comes to serve a political purpose, ultimately of informing consciousness. Now the path from cult mystery to communitarian politics is of course one plagued by entrenched half steps and unfortunate admixtures, and Benjamin is similarly aware that the motivations of capitalist media outlets and industries has little to do with raising consciousness and

educating the working classes – they are quite distinct, for example, from Neurath's plans in creating a universal language of picture statistics. However, the inadvertent consequences of the shift to visual media and art as exhibition are still, according to Benjamin, the liquidation of tradition and a waning authority of public presentations – from hero and genius worship to the spectatorship of the "stars." The film screen – not to mention the computer terminal – is a cultural instantiation of logical space, and the phenomenological consequences are enormous.

As Benjamin puts it, visual media and film in particular achieves a "deepening of apperception." The shape of our sense experience itself has been altered as the camera has begun to perform explicitly the work once achieved only by the productive imagination. Viewpoints are constantly shifting, and insights into formerly closed spaces are offered through the recording and presentation of a second-class reality. Spectatorship is achieved with a good deal of distance and isolation, and thus film has achieved a widespread cognitive intuition of types. We find ourselves in the midst of a sort of collective transcendental reduction; holding the world as phenomena, and thus gaining the opportunity to reflect with perspective upon existing patterns of meaning and the nature of the prevailing social order.

Whether or not this opportunity is taken is a function of philosophical education. Insofar as distance and analysis have been achieved today by proxy, and insofar as the aura of the received has been liquidated by mass reproduction, the ground for philosophical conversion – for the *turn* from noise and domination to service, creation, and discovery – seems to be potentially more fertile than in prior ages. It is easier to mute a television set than a highly esteemed patriarch or demagogue, especially one with recourse to violent force. If and when the aura of the latter can be brought into question by the proliferation of images, and their force constricted by the advent of constitutional law, a new path for development becomes necessary. What is called for is an education, which ascertains the nature of logical space – of pop and pseudo-science as the new immanent socio-political horizon – with respect to the essence of the ethical, scientific and artistic strivings of humankind. What we are currently witnessing is not nihilism as the exhaustion of young souls, but rather the enervation of the urban horizon. In such a situation, an education that informs and embraces the will to translate – in its elevated position between love and law – has the potential to inspire great insight and reform.

However, in the absence of such an education, which has attempted to establish itself in the past two decades either as a return to "great books" or as "citizenship" training, the energy of young people will continue to be squandered in distraction, frustration and anomie — the distinction between tenable and untenable athletics will be ignored and the second class reality of pop will actually be occupied. Needless to say, distraction and social injustice will continue to predominate.

Undoubtedly, what is ultimately called for are new educations that from the beginning attempt to locally occasion joy and creative power in the absence of both tyrannical force and negligent indifference. A social-philosophical dialogue is the perpetually necessary bridge between our situation and that of the community of autonomous individuals that would result from such an education. The university, as Plato envisioned, serves as an

ontological conduit between the city and the examined life. Thus, despite the various attempts of cognitive science and literary theory at collapse – the collapse of the "I," the collapse of the spirit back into nature, or of possibility back into necessity – we find an inviolable role for philosophical conversion which, by struggling with the elements of mob thinking in each of us, allows the individual to collect herself and elect precisely such a collapse, such a cosmological reconciliation.

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Notes:

1. Part I of this essay was entitled "Reduction and Liberal Renewal: The Fate of the "Höherer Standpunkt." Although not included in this volume, the main ideas of that analysis have been worked into the following in order to facilitate understanding.