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PHILOSOPHY IN TIME(S) OF TERROR

Wherever genuine philosophizing begins mere reportage
comes to an end.

—Jürgen Habermas

A “philosopher” would be one who seeks a new criteriology to
distinguish between “comprehending” and “justifying.”

—Jacques Derrida

A review of *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, edited by Giovanna Borradori. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. 200 pp. \$25.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-22-606664-9.

AN AWAITED DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO ESTEEMED THINKERS is moderated by an interviewer in the recent book by Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. In the fall of 2001 in New York, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida were interviewed separately about their reflections upon a list of topics including terror, fundamentalism, and politics. The dialogues were recorded and edited, and Borradori then provided a summary explaining each. Her conclusion is that there is a “Hegelian gap” which marks a point of contention between the two. We are told how Walter Benjamin connects the need for redemption with the present modern situation of knowledge, which leads him to ask how an unpredictable future can still orient a selectivity of the past. “Benjamin, and later on Derrida, develop a strain of Hegel’s reflection on the significance of modernity that is precisely what Habermas, who looks back to Hegel for inspiration, suppresses. This strain concerns a past that can not be articulated discursively” (81).

Habermas will not surrender philosophy to rhetorical and strategic reasoning which makes others a means rather than an end in themselves. The rationalization of social structures needs to be discursively addressed and reasoned publicly, to enable mutual cooperation. Whereas Derrida finds this strain upon discourse something which is always already happening, deconstruction is already underway as he says. It is better for philosophy to reflect upon this supplemental strain rather than be eventually overcome by it. So he endeavors to connect discursive response to a deeper sense of responsibility to the inexpressible, the ultimately aporetic.

The question for both thinkers is the continual questioning of responsibility. For both there is no closure or final answer to the question, "To whom or what am I responsible?" It is as old as the question of who my neighbor is. One might answer, the community of my fellow humans to whom I can communicate and form some regulative rules of society and politics. Another might say, life present, past and future, not only the human, not only in this world. The gap is between a time of response and a responsibility to time, which both philosophers recognize as the question of questioning.

Habermas responds in an accountability to a public procedure, which permits a sharing of place by diverse perspectives. Even religion in modern times is accountable to a public discourse via a conscientious reduction of its ancient universalism, a exclusive claim to truth and its validations. But once religion "learned to see itself through the eyes of others" and realized why they had to renounce violence, in general, and refrain from state power, in particular, for the purpose of enforcing religious claims. This cognitive thrust made religious tolerance, as well as the separation of between state and church, possible for the first time" (31).

In other writings, Habermas distinguishes this dialogue from both an over reliance upon a *philosophical* faith in dialogue (as in Karl Jaspers) and the admittance of systems based upon a negation (as in Michael Theunissen). The response of dialogue is simply a categorical or post-metaphysical step in a procedure of mediation that is deduced from successful communication for its own sake. This entails a public sphere of intersubjectivity that is stubbornly transcendent within each successful act of communication and therefore not dependent upon any hierarchy or privileging of knowledge. Such a hierarchy would be a performative contradiction to communication's simple symmetry between parties exchanging perspectives upon a potentially unified horizon. The alternative to this transcendence from within communication is a response of coercion, which can spiral into terror, with no hope for a possible mutual understanding. However, this cognition can be ignored by some who attempt a

return to the naive universalism implied by “an exclusive claim to truth by one faith” (31).

However, regardless of escapism, coercive control, or terrorism, Habermas nonetheless appeals to a fallible reason which will always depend upon individual capacities to respond to *all* others. He will admit no divide which is what he means by a universal morality. “Membership in this inclusive moral community, which is therefore open to all, promises not only solidarity and a nondiscriminating inclusion, but at the same time equal rights for the protection of everybody’s individuality and otherness” (42). In the next sentences he shows why it is unfair to label him the happy Frankforter. He observes that this universal inclusion of the other is often “abused as a particularly insidious form of legitimization since particular interests can hide behind the glimmering façade of reasonable universality” (42). This happens when structures of communication are constantly distorted “from misunderstanding and incomprehension, from insincerity and deception” (35). Violence begins with each of these distortions of communications, which spiral into reciprocal mistrust and eventual breakdowns in society. However, if this serves as an adequate explanation of how violence begins, “then after it has erupted it is possible to know what has gone wrong and what needs to be repaired” (35).

Although there may be adequate levels of trust on more local levels, fostered by everyday communication, the international community has yet to come to this shared mentality mostly because of a disparity of living conditions. In this situation, ethnocentric agendas are couched in the form of a new political realism that make the admitted point that communication is always ambiguous and should be suspect. “But when communication get ontologized under this description, when ‘nothing but’ violence is seen in it, one misses the essential point: that the critical power to stop violence, without reproducing it in circles of new violence, can only dwell in the telos of mutual understanding and in our orientation toward this goal” (38). To this end, no one should be permitted to lay down the boundaries of tolerance even from their own justified perspectives. A constitution which provides protection for civil-disobedience is an example of how a self-reflexive tolerance may work for the mutual benefit on either side of social boundaries.

Where Habermas excels at explanations of how systems of discourse are damaged and repaired, Derrida begins with the assumption that continual damage is never fully repaired in reason. Even if tolerance and constitutional procedures can be oriented to be inclusive, Derrida discusses an auto-immunity within the body politic. He looks at the processes of indemnification which provide alibis to society, allowing it not to be consistently inclusive even while

continually espousing that ideal. Like Habermas, there is a certain enlightened confidence in governments and cultures that to some extent may institute forms of emancipation and tolerance and protect strangers or minorities. As we in the United States should know by now, the institution of the law is not the same as justice. A proclamation of emancipation may be law, but this is not the same as justice. In such performative utterances from on high, there is always a sovereignty that is protected and tolerance may at times be extended and later revoked. This was Derrida's own experience when citizenship was extended, retracted, and again extended to him as an Algerian Jew during World War II, and then later as he became somewhat assimilated.

I am reminded of the Melian dialogue from Thucydides, when I read "Tolerance is always on the side of the *reason of the strongest*, where *might is right*; it is a supplementary mark of sovereignty, the good face of sovereignty, which says to the other from its elevated position, I am letting you be, you are not insufferable, I am leaving you a place in my home, but do not forget that this is my home..." (127). It is not that Derrida rejects tolerance, which he prefers to intolerance, but he suggests "reservations about the word tolerance and the discourse it organizes." Perhaps Derrida would agree that Thucydides does not only describe the Athenians' Generals who demand the surrender of Melos for its own reasonable good; it is the hidden character of every sovereignty to condescend and to decide for the other, and this character eventually reveals itself.

So he advocates an intellectual and a political *resistance* which is oriented toward an unpredictability of the future. "What I call "democracy to come" would go beyond the limits of cosmopolitanism, that is, of a world citizenship" (130). He proposes a new definition of the political, not depoliticization but rather "another putting into practice of the concept of the 'political' and the concept of the 'world'—which is not the same as 'cosmos' (130-131). The ongoing deconstruction of sovereignty is already at play, evidenced by "limited sovereignty" which Bodin and Hobbes pointed out as a contradiction in terms. This cannot and should not be renounced in itself, but much thought should be devoted to this question. "How are we to reconcile unconditional *auto-nomy* (the foundation of any pure ethics, of the sovereignty of the subject, of the ideal of emancipation and of freedom, and so on) and the *hetero-nomy* that imposes itself upon all unconditional hospitality worthy of this name, of every welcoming of other as other" (134-135)? One sees the conflict of tolerance here insofar as autonomy can become a pre-requisite for hospitality and therefore is always able to revoke it. The principle of tolerance tries to regulate or legislate by an assurance of knowledge and thus to oversee all exchanges of meaning. Derrida suggests rather a regulative idea that remains an "ultimate reservation" even as it "risks becoming an alibi" (133-134).

He ends by describing three reservations of his, or what I might call three forms of an apocalyptic reserve. The first reservation is the judgement between the possible and the impossible. That which “is infinitely deferred, but one which participates in what at the end of an infinite history would still fall into the realm of the possible...in a form that is not wholly freed from all teleological ends.” The opposite side of this suspension is what he calls the order of the impossible, “in what must remain in the order of the impossible, of what must remain (in non-negative fashion) foreign to the order of my possibilities... Such an order can not be *idealized*, no more than the other as other can. This impossible is thus not a regulative *idea* or *ideal*. It is what is most undeniably *real*. Like the other” (134). A judgement as to which order is ultimately regulative, the possible someday or the impossible now, must remain an ongoing wrestling match because to give up on one would mean a brutal self-justification of the status quo. The first form of alibi is resisted by holding the possible and impossible accountable to each other in every exchange between these two orders.

The second reservation concerns a suspension of knowledge, which must not be allowed to dictate the right action. When actions immediately follow as a calculable consequence, then one knows what to do without hesitation and there is no decision for which to take responsibility, “the decision no longer decides anything but simply gets deployed with the automatism attributed to machines” (134).

The third reservation would “have to begin by asking about what Kant calls, ‘those differences in the interest of reason,’ the *imaginary*, the necessary *illusion*, which does not necessarily deceive us, the figure of an approach or approximation (*zu nähern*) that tends indefinitely towards rules of universality, and especially the indispensable use of the *as if (als ob)*” (135). The point is that no process of thinking is without its dependence upon a tradition that is yet unfinished. Thus, today's community can be served only by also suspending it, by imagining its origins and outcomes in a way that does not give in to rules of exchange that are at hand, even though there is no escape from the present either. I read all three reservations as a way to hold open various orders, so that they may speak to each other without one becoming dominant. This will be key for any advance upon the topic of world terrorism(s).

So to return to the topic of the title, the heading provided here, of philosophy in a time of terrorism. Borroddori concludes by alluding to a new direction, a new heading, toward a new form of sovereignty which Europe might move toward if it were to take responsibility for its past, what Derrida calls “a memory of the past which has never been present” (172). It is this sense of responsibility that must be based in otherness, rather than self-identity and decision-making with

integrity, as Habermas emphasizes.

Both thinkers here have a sense of history and of the pitfalls of hubris, and thus a sense of how to proceed cautiously and courageously. While Habermas braces the procedures of response, a philosophical passage or shaft between self and other, an identity which is always hollowed out in terror of impending doom, one could ask Socrates who lived and loved an Athens mad with its own sense of justice or any host of others about this. Derrida seems to me to have a sense of depth and direction, how to begin to figure where to dig the dark shaft of responsible philosophy.

I have to ask if this orientation of philosophy is helpful in addressing the religiously inspired terrors of today. When the plan of salvation does not go as planned (and it never seems to), religion often resorts to forms of terror. When apocalyptic groups are disappointed by the failure of the world to end or by their own lack of success, they can either disband or else exclusivize the validation process of their claims. Because something further has to be done, necessity dictates a plan of action which is a type of terrorism. A sectarian fundamentalism presents a choice between escapism, sometimes in the form of cyanide laced kool-aid, or an intensified zealotry, sometimes in the form of crashing airplanes, depending upon which side of the divide the world ultimately stands. In this respect, it is not surprising that the actual turn of the year 2000 did not create chaos but that immediately afterwards when nothing eventful really happened at the immediate turn, a new zealotry has erupted onto the scene and a pervasive impatience has ensued. In both Habermas and Derrida, the answer to terror seems to be patience. To listen involves patience, to truly respond involves patience, and so does agreeing to disagree. There are too few projects of dialogue that listen patiently and that build trust between partners. There are less reservations of judgement in a time of terror.

There is a lack of patience. As Jacques Derrida states, "The prevailing discourse, that of the media and the official rhetoric, relies too readily on received concepts like 'war' or 'terrorism' (national or international)" (100). Jürgen Habermas also develops more patience for the procedures of discourse to succeed, "Struggling with the difficulties of understanding, people must, step by step, widen their original perspectives and ultimately bring them together" (37). In both projects, one is asked to refrain from normative prescription and to reserve ultimate justification of one perspective. There are two varieties of patience: while one is oriented more to the limited field of any discourse, the other is oriented to each new application or *event* of conceptuality presented within general discourses, which also always present new problems by their exchange. One patience does not expect too much, the other always expects something different.

I find both important in a time of terror. The first is needed in any common pursuit which demands analysis, any committee assignment or social study. The second is needed when apathy overcomes, when hope fades, or when expectations are that it will be worse.

It is the patience of hope that is attuned to an invincible promise, which is part of the realization that the world is part of a wider economy, a sovereignty to come. The new frontier is a memory which pursues discursively the promise of the past that is never actualized. I find this pursuit of promise in ancient Athens, in an early Christianity, and in any group's organic capacity to open wider, often after realizing its errors. It is not the domain of modern philosophy, although this can take part in this continual widening of the "world."

The combined proposal of philosophy in a time of terror is to feed and to be fed by an everyday discourse which widens worlds and which brings horizons in touch with one another despite different temporalizations, different times. It is not only the local and those who are already included whom we must learn to trust and who must learn to trust us. This type of discourse, beginning with self-criticism and vulnerability, is the front against the concrete terrors that come in repetition. It is a performative witness that the end of philosophy can be to open the human family, maybe to include life in general.

In closing, I am tempted to repeat what Hannah Arendt said about Hegel, Heidegger, and other modern exemplars who create a myth out of modernity by retelling and reconstructing events in an eternal realm of *memoria*. She saw that an inactive or latent memory is a deficit within modernity. Arendt sees a "gap" between past and future, the freedom of the individual to respond in responsibility is inserted between. Evoking Augustine, Kafka, Hegel, Heidegger, she says, "Only insofar as he thinks, and that is insofar as he is "ageless"—a he, as Kafka so rightly calls him, and not a "somebody"—does man in the full actuality of his concrete being live in the gap of time between past and future."¹

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¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 13.