

Can there be a Regional (Caribbean) Philosophy?

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Part I: Introduction

As the head of a division of humanities of a large American university I am part bureaucrat and part philosopher. I am not of the Caribbean, unless you allow that Ft. Lauderdale is a Caribbean city. But because I am in Ft. Lauderdale, I have met and come to know many people from the region, particularly students. In my bureaucratic role I have been working toward building Caribbean studies program at my university and in my philosopher role I then started to wonder what a course in Caribbean philosophy would be like or even whether such a thing was a coherent at all. When I saw the announcement for this conference and began thinking about this paper, I was immediately confronted with one significant objection to the whole enterprise of a regional or specifically in our case, Caribbean, philosophy.

The objection can be characterized in something like the following way. Philosophy as traditionally understood in the West is a systematic, univocal, unified, coherent, universal theoretical enterprise, neutral as to any substantive value orientation. This traditional or received view of philosophy marginalizes anything that cannot be construed as universal. Any theoretical endeavor that is historically specific, or historicist, is labeled 'relativistic' and value-laden and is quickly dismissed as marginal or less than serious. Some see the relativistic tendencies in the theoretical endeavors of various sub-cultures as giving license to previously repressed or contained transgressive tendencies as poetic, perhaps, but also as potentially dangerous. So the label that a particular cultural style of thought is an example of relativism is not at all simply an esoteric academic dispute.

I would like to respond to this objection by rehearsing a few arguments of some well-known critics of the traditional view. I will use the work of Sartre, Foucault, Horkheimer, and Rorty to develop an answer to the question whether there can be a regional (or Caribbean) philosophy. I will conclude that not only is such a philosophy possible, it is vital for the identity and well-being of the region.

Part II: The Received View of Philosophy

The "received view" in the history of philosophy situates Descartes at the origin of the program of modern philosophy. In his book *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Stephen Toulmin offers an account of the young Descartes developing a conception of a programmatic philosophy in response to the skepticism and empiricism of Montaigne, and to the religious disputes that erupted into the turmoil of the Thirty Years' War. Descartes' basic assumption is that in the absence of foundational truths and values, fragmentation and perpetual conflict was inevitable. The *Meditations* is the source in modern philosophy of the metaphor of the "foundation" and for the conviction

that the philosopher's quest is to search for an "Archimedean point" on which we can ground our knowledge.¹

The Cartesian epistemological tradition was an attempt to formulate rules and procedures for attaining knowledge. Descartes claims at one point that

the power of judging well and of distinguishing between the true from the false, which, properly speaking is what is called good sense, or reason, is by nature equal in all men...²

Descartes himself understood the procedure to consist in part in building knowledge out of the inferences from indubitable first premises. The empiricist tendency views knowledge as achieved by inference from basic sense experiences. The practical upshot of the empiricist tendency in the Cartesian epistemological tradition is its development into the positivist theory of knowledge and understanding of science.

According to the positivist self-understanding of science, the adequacy of a theory is judged according to the theory's "objectivity." Objectivity in this sense means intersubjective verification made possible by value-neutrality. Scientists, according to the positivist view, should be sure to purge their theories of their own "subjective" or partisan values, interests and emotions. These, it is claimed, would bias or distort the results of scientific inquiry. For the positivist view, scientists must be "detached" observers, following strict methodological rules that allow them to separate themselves from their field of study and the particular values, interests and emotions generated by their specific situation.

The positivist criterion of objectivity finds its way into much contemporary moral and political theory. Here objectivity does not mean to be free of value judgments, but to be free of the value judgments of any particular person or group, to be "unbiased." Consider these representative remarks by John Rawls:

In order to find an Archimedean point it is not necessary to appeal to a priori or perfectionist principles. By assuming certain general desires, such as the desire for primary social goods, and by taking as a basis the agreements that would be made in a suitably defined initial situation, we can achieve the requisite independence from existing circumstances.³

Objective value judgments in this sense would be those made by an individual who was impartial in the sense of giving no special weight to his or her own or to any other special

¹ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, (NY: The Free Press, 1990), p.177.

² Rene Descartes. Discourse on Method, in *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (NY: The Modern Library, 1958), p.93.

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.263.

interests. The positivist political philosopher is one who is "detached" from the contingencies of his or her situation. Objectivism of this sort, assumes that without a neutral standpoint that is somehow detached from the present, it is impossible to make sense out of our own historical situation. The crucial positivist claim, for our purposes, is that an adequate study of society requires the theorist to be an impartial observer, neutral with respect to the values of the particular historical situation in which his or her theorizing takes place. Only then can such theorizing be considered rational.

Even Leonard Tim Hector says,

[For Kant], the point is, whatever the inner voice of Reason commands is objective, universal, timeless, true for all men, and I add, not culture determined. All values are created by free human choice, reason and rational choice, are the essence of humanity; of dignity as human beings.⁴

But I don't think this is quite right. Let us look at some important critics of this epistemological-positivistic tradition.

Part III: Sartre's arguments against value-neutrality.

Sartre sees the attempt to gain an "objective" knowledge of the world and oneself in the manner of positivism as an attempt to avoid the responsibility for choosing one's project. The thesis of value-neutrality suggests, according to Sartre, both that there is a strict distinction to be made between "facts" and "values," and that once one has a sufficient grasp of the so called facts, nothing remains for the theorist to do but to adopt an attitude that "conforms" to them such that rational discussion of what attitude to adopt would be inappropriate. Such a conception troubles Sartre because it masks the role of choice. It disguises the fact that to use one set of true sentences to describe ourselves is already to choose an attitude toward ourselves, whereas to use another set of true sentences is to adopt a contrary attitude. The notion that there is one right way of describing and explaining reality, the notion that defines "truth" for the positivist, is for Sartre, just the notion of having a way of describing and explaining imposed on us in that brute way in which stones impinge on our feet.

Experience is confined to displaying the close connection between the physiological and psychological, and this connection is subject to a thousand different kinds of interpretation.⁵

From Sartre's point of view, conceiving of knowledge as the one appropriate description assumes universality as an appropriate criterion of that knowledge. Universality in this sense is one way of conceiving of value-neutrality. For a universal description in this

⁴ Leonard Tim Hector, *The Making of Caribbean Philosophy, Part II*, June 5, 1998, Fan the Flame, <http://www.candw.ag/~jardinea/fanflame.htm> .

⁵ Sartre, "Materialism and Revolution," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson, (N.Y.: Collier Books, 1962), p.201.

sense implies that it is appropriate for "anyone," and the idea of an "anyone" is one that is an abstraction from real circumstances that define real persons. To look for a way of reducing all possible descriptions to one is to attempt to escape from humanity. To find a single universal descriptive vocabulary would allow us to identify human-beings-under-a-given-description with the human "essence." And this conclusion is, of course, the sort of position to which Sartre's entire project of existentialism is a critical response.

Abstracting individuals away from their specific social situations as does the "analytic cast of mind," as well as obscuring from view their solidarity with others in a like situation, precludes the sort of social and political analysis that motivates critical social theory. Moreover, it pulls the rug out from under those who are considering changing their social circumstances by suggesting that those circumstances are simply given. The spirit of analysis embraced by science, claims Sartre, is really a "philosophy of oppression" because it

tries to conceal its pragmatic character; as it is aimed not at changing the world, but at maintaining it, it claims to contemplate the world as it is. It regards society and nature from the viewpoint of pure knowledge, without admitting to itself that this attitude tends to perpetuate the present state of the universe by implying that the universe can be known rather than changed and that if one actually does want to change it, one must first know it.⁶

Either because it subscribes to a concept of a fixed human nature or because it considers itself to have achieved the privileged position of an absolute arbiter, the value-neutral approach of the analytic spirit masks its own normative status and often parades as a justification for exploitation and domination, especially, as Sartre's later political essays attest, of a domination over native populations in colonial conquests. Thus Sartre rejects as a misleading myth the idea of a foundationalism that would provide the neutral ground upon which one could base his or her social criticism, as misleading as the notion of a value-neutral representation with which it is intimately bound up. As early as *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre claimed, "...representation, as a psychic event, is a pure invention of philosophers."⁷

Part IV: Foucault's arguments against value-neutrality.

Throughout his career Foucault has been concerned to uncover in the various human sciences the play of power that hid behind the mask of value-neutrality. Thus, not only does Foucault, like Sartre, argue against the associated notions of representation and foundationalism, but more importantly, Foucault believes with Sartre that claims to value-neutrality in the sciences amount to nothing more than myths, mystifying real

⁶ *ibid.*, pp.227-228.

⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (N.Y.: Philosophical Library, 1956), p.217.

networks of domination within which people are caught up. For Foucault "[a]ll knowledge is rooted in a life, and a language that have a history..."⁸ But moving beyond Sartre in a more radical way, Foucault suggests that more than simply masking plays of power, the discourse of value-neutrality itself can be a significant mode of operation of power.

According to Foucault, the human sciences do not actually yield "truth" in the traditional value-neutral sense. The received view is that value-neutral truth, i.e., truth that is free of ideological commitments, is liberating, that once one is confronted by an accurate representation of reality, as it were, an individual or group will be freed from psychological or social delusions. But Foucault's investigation of the social practices of the human sciences reveals that they establish "regimes of truth" which impose normalizing standards that have the effect of "subjectifying" human beings. That is, the human sciences actually make subjects out of us both in the sense of creating our identities and in the sense that we then become engaged in the creation of our own subjection.⁹

As with Sartre, Foucault suggests that a value-neutral stance presupposes a fixed object of study, such that one's observations can be used as the basis of the universal claims of one's science. This in turn presupposes that there is something fixed in human nature that can be the basis of the deep "truth" about human beings. Psychoanalysis, for example, in its claim to "reveal" the "truth" about ourselves, implicitly relies on a distorted view that there is an essence to reveal, an essence that can be reflected in the psychoanalytic mirror. This distorted view suggests that human subjects are "preformed," that those subjects are often repressed by various ideological layers, and the expert is the one who can dispel these ideological clouds and liberate the real or true subject. Like Sartre, Foucault rejects the notion of a fixed human essence and understands subjectivity to involve a certain amount of creative activity.

I think that from the theoretical point of view, Sartre avoids the idea of the self as something which is given to us.... I think that the only practical consequence of what Sartre has said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity....¹⁰

From Nietzsche Foucault accepts that there are no facts, only interpretations of the world; no objective truths, only the constructs of various individuals or groups. Since the world has no single meaning, but rather countless meanings, a theorist qua "perspectivist" seeks

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (NY: Vintage Books, 1973), pp.372-373.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (NY: Vintage Books, 1979), pp.27-28, 192-194, 217.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, second edition, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.237.

multiple interpretations of phenomena and insists there is "no limit to the ways in which the world can be interpreted."¹¹

The perspectivist position that Foucault comes to embrace holds that theories at best provide partial perspectives on their objects, and that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated. Foucault rejects the philosophical pretension to grasp systematically all of reality within one philosophical system or from one central vantage point. This, of course, is another way of conceiving of the search for the elusive "Archimedean point" from which reality could be assessed and criticized and which, as we saw, was at the heart of positivism's objectivist program and which has provided a dominant model for philosophy in the West.

Part V: Horkheimer's Critical Theory: An Alternative

In a well known essay Horkheimer opposed "traditional" and "critical" forms of theory. Traditional theory (or what we have here identified as the received view), beginning with Descartes, exhibits a concern with universal, systematic science.¹² The first thing to note about Horkheimer's characterization is that traditional theory aspires, as he says, to be "a universal systematic science" which "anyone...can use...at any time." In contrast, a critical social theory analyzes social situations in terms of those features of it which can be altered in order to eliminate at least some of the felt frustrations of its members. Given this as the aim of critical social theory, its analyses are necessarily bound by a specific historical horizon. Critical theories cannot be universal in any absolute sense and will therefore not, contrary to the claim of traditional theory as Horkheimer sees it, be relevant for anyone to use at any time. What is relevant is the particular social situation, the discernible frustrations of those involved with that situation and the specific relation between these two factors.

The second feature to note in Horkheimer's characterization of traditional theory is the assumption that the "conceptual apparatus" used for analyzing "inanimate nature" is appropriate for "animate nature" as well. That is, from a metatheoretical point of view, there need be no distinction between the method of the so-called natural sciences and that of the social sciences. The obvious underlying assumption here is that as the object of theory, there is no relevant difference between human beings and "inanimate nature." To accomplish its aim critical social theory self-consciously integrates theory and practice. That is, critical theory is "validated" to the degree that it informs practice in the desired ways. This means that what is desired and who is doing the desiring is relevant; that what sort of frustration is felt and who feels it is relevant to the theory and theorist. This is its "hermeneutical dimension." In critical theory that which is theorized are the intentions of agents. It is teleological in the sense that it attempts to "explain" action and in the sense that it attempts to contribute to the achievement of actors' aims. According

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kauffman, (NY: Vintage Books, 1968), p.326.

¹² Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (NY: Continuum, 1982), pp.188-89.

to this view, theoretical claims are confirmed to the extent that they succeed in these attempts.

Measuring knowledge claims in terms of the satisfaction of human purposes and desires and limiting the range of these claims to a specific historical domain, i.e. to specific human purposes in a particular social situation, means that there must be a certain rapport between theorist and social actors. The claims of the critical social theorist and the self-understandings of actors must cohere and be reciprocally enlightening. Horkheimer says,

It is the task of the critical theoretician to reduce the tension between his own insight and oppressed humanity in whose service he thinks.¹³

Furthermore this relationship implies a commitment on the part of the theorist and actors to explicit value assumptions. Situated in concrete social experience, critical social theory, then, not only eschews any pretense to value-neutrality, but explicitly embraces specific value assumptions.

Simply put, for Horkheimer the major problem with traditional theory rests with its "objectivism." That is, such theory assumes that the validity and truth of its knowledge consists in passively mirroring a reality, whose form and content is given independently of the subject's activity. Above all, it falsely assumes that its perception of the facts is purified of all extraneous, subjective values and concepts.

Appealing to the tradition of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, Horkheimer remarks that the "detached" perspective of the scientist is belied by the fact that

the facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity.... The perceived fact is therefore co-determined by human ideas and concepts, even before its conscious theoretical elaboration by the knowing individual....¹⁴

Traditional theory becomes "ideological", Horkheimer claims, by failing to acknowledge that its knowledge represents but one particular interpretation of reality which conditions, and is conditioned by, the historical world. The conception of knowledge as a function of passive and value-neutral observation tacitly legitimates the status quo, by claiming for it natural necessity and universality. By making transparent the hidden social context of specific types of knowledge, critical theory dissolves the false notions of universality and necessity inherent in all forms of objectivism. Thus, claims Horkheimer, critical theory offers a new model of philosophy which enables the subject of knowledge and action to

¹³ Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," p.221.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 200-201.

project new possibilities of knowing and acting that transcend those prescribed by tradition.

Part VI: Conclusion

Richard Rorty has pointed out that "...we can...take from Heidegger the idea that the desire for an 'epistemology' is simply the most recent product of the dialectical development of an originally chosen set of metaphors."¹⁵

Sartre agrees that what we call knowledge, for Heidegger a particular metaphor, is a specific choice bound up with our more fundamental choice of our way of being, our project. Another student of Heidegger, Herbert Marcuse, explains it this way.

The..."project"... results from a determinate choice, seizure of one among other ways of comprehending, organizing, and transforming reality. The initial choice defines the range of possibilities open on this way, and precludes alternative possibilities incompatible with it.... The object world is thus the world of a specific historical project, and is never accessible outside the historical project which organizes matter....¹⁶

In his more recent work Rorty calls people who are capable of adopting new languages "ironists," because they inflict even their most fervent commitments with doubt. It is possible that what they hold most intimately true today may be replaced tomorrow by better ways of seeing and saying things. They are aware of the contingency of their current state and a willingness to change narratives.¹⁷

New languages, new ways of seeing and describing our world in a new language is the work of poetry. We can see this theme in the words of several contemporary poets of the region. Derek Walcott, in his poem, *Codicil*, says, "To change your language you must change your life."¹⁸ And as Kamau Brathwaite explains in an interview,

We have not yet explored the potentialities of nation language and I think that we will not really know how far we can go with it until it becomes officially accepted. In other words, when news broadcasts can be read in nation language in addition to Standard English and when the Examination Council recognizes it and asks for it in their exam.¹⁹

¹⁵ Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.163.

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp.210, 219.

¹⁷ Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹⁸ Derek Walcott, *Codicil*, http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/poetry/walcott_derek.html#derek1.

¹⁹ Interview with Kamau Brathwaite, <http://www.thecaribbeanwriter.com/volume5/brathwaite.html>.

In a similar vein, Paget Henry says, “If we are to re-take control of the cultural aspects of our self-formation, then we must cultivate and produce the philosophical anthropologies, the ethical, ontological, epistemological, and other discourses that we continue to import from the West. The time for breaking these philosophical dependencies is now.”²⁰

Wittgenstein said a language is a way of life. A new language is potentially a new way to live. Henry quotes Franz Fanon, “For Europe, for ourselves and for our humanity, Comrades, We must turn over a new leaf. We must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.”²¹ I suggest we turn Plato on his head and instead of banishing the poets, we embrace their words and the perspectives they reveal. In this way philosophy can finally project new possibilities of knowing and acting that transcend those prescribed by tradition and be uniquely Caribbean.

²⁰ Paget Henry. *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*. NY: Routledge, 2000, p.276.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.273.