

POSTSCRIPT

Speculative thought has its characteristic strategies of survival and progress. One of them is to acknowledge only as much reality as we can order imaginatively with the intellectual tools that we already possess or can hope to fashion. When our recognition of reality goes too far beyond the symmetries and patterns that we have learned to imagine, we risk being overwhelmed. The resulting confusion may actually prevent us from developing the more subtle and inclusive conceptions of order that might enable us to acknowledge a broader range of experience. If, however, we never move at the edge of our imaginative capabilities, we have little opportunity to discover truths that put to the test our available ideas about the intelligible relations among things.

When I wrote *Knowledge and Politics* I was interested in a series of factual and normative questions about society and personality that I found no way to deal with head on. In fact, only retrospectively can I appreciate just how indirect my approach to these issues really was. Though the problems that interest me have changed since I wrote this book, they have not changed as much as my ways of going about them.

I treated the matters that concerned me as occasions for a battle of abstract categories related to one another in quasi-logical fashion. The drawback of this approach is not so much "rationalism" or "idealism"—for I was careful to defuse such interpretations of my argument—as the dangerous imprecision of the *quasi* in the use of a quasi-logical method. Should the arguments of *Knowledge and Politics* be taken at face value? Or should they be read as an allegory about problems of moral or political experience—a strange allegory in which the more abstract stands for the less abstract?

My ideas about the themes of this book have moved in three main directions. These shifts are worth mentioning because they suggest an interpretation of the half-deliberate allegory that may not occur to the reader.

THE CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL REALITY

Knowledge and Politics is marked by an all-or-nothing attitude toward mental and social structures and by a corresponding faith in the possibility and the necessity of sharp, discontinuous change in the habitual settings of our social and mental activities. The clearest sign of this attitude is my search for the master principle or ruling mechanism that supposedly keeps a system of thought or a form of social life going. Once we identify the key element, the argument of the essay implies, we can replace it.

But the point of departure for an adequate account of social reality and social transformation, I am now convinced, must be the rejection of two misleading views. One view, identified with naive historiography and positivist social science, denies the significance of the contrast between structure-preserving and structure-transforming acts. It sees only one event happening after another or particular causes producing particular effects. It therefore tends to disregard how much of what goes on in social life depends upon institutional arrangements and imaginative assumptions that are taken for granted. It slights the discontinuities among the formative contexts, structures, or frameworks composed by such assumptions and arrangements. The other view—most clearly represented by the evolutionary and functionalist social theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—gives a central role to the distinction between activities within the settled institutional and imaginative contexts of our deeds, relations, and beliefs and activities about these contexts. But it sees the contexts as indivisible wholes occupying a place within either a list of possible types of social organization or a compulsive sequence of stages of social evolution. And it treats the list or the sequence as governed by a set of higher-order laws.

Imagine by contrast to these views a style of social thought that insists upon the distinction between structure-preserving and structure-transforming events but that refuses the appeal to underlying laws. Such

a view sees structures as capable of being renewed or recombined piecemeal rather than all at once; revolutionary reform becomes its characteristic image of change. A social theory that incorporates this principle resists the temptation to hunt for the major principle or mechanism that generates a whole system of thought or a social world. Instead, it is especially attentive to the incongruous or deviant elements in our present ways of thinking or living—to all the anomalies that cannot be completely suppressed. And it takes the most characteristic method of change to be the effort to seize upon one of these deviant possibilities and to extend it, while transforming it, until it comes to occupy a more influential position.

THE CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

Today I would be much less anxious to emphasize the dependence of liberal ideas upon certain basic conceptions of modern speculative philosophy that first took recognizable form in the seventeenth century. Instead, my focus would fall more explicitly upon the classic nineteenth-century forms of liberalism. Together with socialism and communism, the liberal teaching represents one of the great modern secular doctrines of emancipation. All these doctrines share a faith in the individual and collective empowerment to be gained by a weakening of the restrictive force that entrenched systems of social division and hierarchy impose upon the possible forms of practical or passionate human connection. One type of empowerment that can result from such an emancipation is the development of productive capabilities. Another is the making of social relations that increasingly allow us to achieve self-assertion through attachment and thereby free us from the need to choose between isolation from other people and surrender to them—to their authority or their opinions. Yet another mode of empowerment is the furtherance of our ability to render the social and mental contexts of our existence increasingly transparent and available for revision in the midst of our ordinary activities.

But the vision of empowerment in the classical doctrines of emancipation is clouded by unjustifiably restrictive assumptions about the possible forms of social life and in particular about the possible institutional definitions of markets and democracies. In place of the

theory of organic groups, I would put a program that extends the ideal of empowerment, and relates it to ideals that it seems to exclude, by freeing it from unnecessarily confining premises. The programmatic ideas would draw upon the style of social theory whose basic orientation I earlier described.

Such a program would characterize its proposals as outcomes of a specifiable series of conceptual and practical adjustments of existing arrangements and ruling ideas. It would deepen the conception of freedom as empowerment by proposing ways in which this freedom may be more fully realized. It would cast its lot decisively with modernism, refusing to seek in anti-modernist fantasies a secret consolation for the failure to rethink and reconstruct the circumstances of life in the modern world. It would be a super-liberalism rather than either an anti-liberalism or a synthesis of liberalism with its imaginary opposite.

THE CATEGORIES OF PHILOSOPHY

Much of this book addresses a scheme of speculative categories that has come close to dominating Western philosophy ever since philosophy lost its anchor in Aristotelian essentialism and teleology. This scheme has exercised its influence less as a cohesive framework than as a set of basic conceptual tools whose uses and limitations influence the direction of thought. What becomes of the analysis of these categories and of their relation to politics once the critique of liberalism is reoriented in the ways indicated? The categories can be understood as the ideas of a philosophical tradition that sought intellectual safety in an attempt to avoid committing itself to any particular substantive conception of society, personality, or nature. But when it resorted to this technique of avoidance, modern philosophy merely produced one more view of society and the self—the view whose building blocks the chapters on liberal psychology and liberal politics set out to describe. My analysis of the antinomies in this tradition of thought can be read as an argument that a mode of thought informed by such categories generates problems that it cannot solve on its own terms.

By generalizing this criticism further, we can connect it with politics. The alternative conception of universals and particulars defended in *Knowledge and Politics* implicitly proposes a view of our

relation to the contexts of our activity. The real fact that stands behind the shadowy metaphysical notion of a universal is the living human personality, both as a mind engaged in inquiries about the world and as an incarnate individual enmeshed in a detailed social world. The particulars are the forms of discourse or explanation and the more or less closely connected sets of institutional arrangements and of imaginative preconceptions that provide us with the stable settings of a life in society.

The approach to the problem of universals and particulars for which I argue in *Knowledge and Politics* amounts to a thesis about our relation to these settings and therefore also about our shared human identity. We can never think or live within an unconditional framework. We can always make more discoveries about the world than can be accommodated in any denumerable list of styles of inquiry or explanation. Similarly, no version of social life, and no closed list of such versions, exhausts the types of practical or passionate human connection that we may have good reason to establish. But in the course of history, of the history of thought and of the history of society, we can change our relation to our contexts by finding the structures of thought and of life that empower us more fully, in part because they are more available to us for understanding and revision.

Like many other speculative works *Knowledge and Politics* resorts to tactics that partly betray its intentions. Its rejection of the single most prominent cluster of categories and categorical oppositions in modern philosophy is not meant to lead back into the teleology and essentialism that the modern philosophical tradition was born combating. But for lack of better alternatives archaic ideas, even ideas with a teleological and essentialist tinge, are pressed here into the service of an ultra-modernist program. The program should be carried forward whatever the compromises that mar its formulation in this book.

MAY 1983