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Bending Moral Philosophy and Philosophy of History Toward Each Other

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In his journal of intimate thoughts (called The Inward Morning) written while journeying through the wildernesses of Montana, the American existentialist philosopher Henry Bugbee (1915–1999)—who had fled there from the Harvard Philosophy Department and who remains little known even in the U.S.—wrote: "Reflection, it seems, must earn the gift of the essential meaning of things past." I think this is true, that the past is both exemplar of moral reflection and part of the substance of it. I have written a book to argue for the how and why of this truth, called Power and Compassion: On Moral Force Ethics and Historical Change. After it completes its adventures in peer review, it will be published by Amsterdam University Press late this year or early in 2025. My talk today will, I hope, give you a glimpse of the case I make for bending philosophy of history and moral philosophy toward each other. The wilderness of the past is meaningful to us only because it is the site of moral reflection.

In introducing my book, I will follow a different line of exposition from that in the book itself. I must add here that in doing so just within my fifteen or twenty minutes I shall not list the thinkers who have influenced this development; but, in addition to those of the past and present, some of them also are in this room and at this conference. I am grateful to them for this opportunity.

Consider the Cartesian subject who observes, analyzes, and manipulates the world, even one who does so as responsibly as a good sovereign does her own kingdom. Along with the good intentions and functional results of the operations of Cartesian subjectivity, we find that many harms ensue, including destructive technologies, oppressive governmental power, degraded ecology, and hypercapitalism, the demon that possesses the agents of the other

harms. Behind these there lies perhaps our death-drive, if it exists. So we seek for values by which to moderate our appetites and acts. But the Cartesian subject excludes such values because its cognitive processes and goals suppress other kinds of understanding. We know this suppression as the fact/value or is/ought distinction, and we sometimes summarize the condition of culture, society, and living subscribed by this as the disenchanted world.

We then seek various ways out of this unhappy result. Deconstruction promises a freedom all the way down from false certainties about the human situation. Linguistic narrativism tries to save some kind of value from the clutches of ontological realism. Or we turn to Wittgensteinian mysticism, following it into the worldwide spiritual traditions of humankind. These approaches are themselves vulnerable to powerful critiques because they do not nourish commitments to values we find to be necessary. Thus, among other lines of thought, Marxism shows us that any such approach is englobed in productive systems of society that must morally become the chief targets of critique in favor of really valuing human flourishing. The advent of the Anthropocene and its accompanying obsolescence of anthropocentrism insist that we affirmatively follow values necessary to the well-being of humankind and of other living beings.

In seeking a way to respond to such conundrums as those I have mentioned, moral philosophy has generally been subordinated to epistemology and ontology. It seems that it must justify itself on their grounds. A number of important philosophers, including virtue ethicists, seek to avoid this trap, but in my judgment they fail in their several ways to support a sufficiently powerful notion of positive moral obligation. Without this, we are left with nothing but raw power, as Glaucon was the first of many to point out. Furthermore, as the embodied, situated persons that we are, with local loyalties and cherished affinities, seeking the way to the universal prescriptions that moral obligations seem to consist of is treacherous. For both being rooted in the particular and reaching for the universal are very, very human.

It is to history, the experience of the past, that I have turned as the site of reflection needed to cleave away the dead ends and blockages that inhibit our understanding of moral force. The problem of the temporal span of moral life was first noticed and addressed by Kant as a hope and then placed at or near the core of philosophy by Hegel, Marx, and Benjamin, as the center point of the canonical philosophy of history of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. When the long views led by hope failed, Heidegger turned our thinking toward a different understanding of finitude—one that, placing us between infinity and nothingness, sees history as an existential condition that has strong ethical consequences. Many developments in historiography, as well, have returned ethical issues to the center. Moral philosophy over the last fifty years also has been turning toward history and description.

Conventionally, philosophers regard history as particular and contingent and philosophical meaning as essential and universal. This is one of the sources of the conflict in

moral philosophy between ethical principles and the lives of individuals. As a result standard disciplinary Anglophone moral philosophy is propositionalist—that is, it reasons by propositional logic, which, being static by nature, excludes change. My work is related to the currently expanding philosophical interest in moral change, by endeavoring to examine and ground an understanding of moral life as diachronic. In my book I argue pointedly and very specifically against the form of the "genealogical method" in ethics arising from the work of Bernard Williams. I find that it uses toy-like pseudo-historical accounts and thus reverts to establishing sequences of propositions, such as the "state of nature" notions that Williams and Philip Petit use, that might appear to be logically necessary but that do not address actual moral change.

I take actual history as the sum of human behavior; and, as all intentional activity requires judgment and is evaluative, I regard moral life as the substance of human history. In truth the deliberations, choices, and actions that comprise our individual and collective lives are in substance the enactments and alterations of judgments as to good and evil as they pertain to the issues challenging our predecessors and ourselves, refracted through innumerable thicker concepts, such as virtues and vices, and through material and social conditions. History is made not by propositions but by the activities of moral agents, human and non-human.

Since I define personhood as moral agency, my approach is in the line of philosophical personalism (especially American or "Boston" personalism). As a thinker in the broad personalist tradition, I am studying ways to re-found personalism for the present and coming times in which we must live. Under this view, personhood is regarded as fully relational. It is relational not, or not only, as part of its metaphysics, or in its continuity or discontinuity as a mind or as a cognizer, nor in its political status as a receptacle of rights, and duties, nor again as part of the ecology of biological entities, but by virtue of the universal mediation that encompasses us all. In each mediation our choices affect others, creating the persvasion of our reality by a universal web of moral claims.

The past is the body of moral relations in which past persons lived. All persons are related by interdependent in history because of our material and psychic constitution. For this reason, in my work I use the complex and often misused concept of historicity to refer to the interdependence of our lives. Interdependence is, it is true, a selection from the range of things to which historicity can refer. But I center interdependence because it is supremely important and universal. We live in reflexive relation to actual others, past and present and future, whose lives we change, with whom we must live, and to whom we are responsible. This basis for personalism connects personhood as moral agency to history as its locus, its theater of operation. History is nothing if it is not collective existence.

Here, then, is not the objectivizing Cartesian subject but the person who is a reflective moral agent. The view that meaningfulness of this sort is so fully in all the world of our affairs that it cannot be accessed through facts as necessarily conceived by empirical

sciences and also, for example, by linguistic narrativism, and even by much of the phenomenology of feelings and of historical discourse—this view aims to preserve evaluative judgment in a sacred precinct and at the same time threatens to hollow it out because it excludes the reality of history. The wilderness of history is the sacred grove of the moral life of all moral agents, including human and non-human persons. It is a locus for actual, embodied, humane understanding.

To serve this concept of relational, trans-generational moral life as product of a subject both trans-temporal and situated in history, I use a four-part schema as a general theory of relations among persons, comprising relations: to oneself, to the persons one loves, to one's wider collectives, and to the community of persons as a whole. This schema is used to provide an explanation of history as the particpatory creation of moral meaningfulness. I describe the four levels both for history and for personhood in exactly congruent ways. Each level is attached to a specific, elaborated conceptualization. The two adjacent chapters in which I do this are very long, so I shall not now explain more of the extended argument.

But in order to activate the parallelism of history and personhood, a whole other idea must enter the picture. Understanding moral change is essential to both philosophy of history and moral philosophy; but to understand it philosophically, we need to analyze the forces driving moral change at the highest theoretical level. For just hanging historical meaningfulness and personal moral life next to, or even on top of, one another on a four-floor scaffolding does not give us adequate instruments for any prescriptive moral force. What we require is an insight into what is the reflection, the work, the struggle that actualizes th is clear structure of relationality in moral deliberation, choice, and action. How can we theorize what I call elsewhere in my work the participatory creation of moral meaningfulness in actual history? In particular: how can we analyze the creation in common of moral life in a way that makes historiographic work and non-academic historical experience into parts our capacity for moral understanding?

All of this requires insight into the moral elements in human behavior. I call these elements moral forces. There are two of them: power and compassion. They are the compelling lines of thought that become great large-scale driving forces in moral thought, deliberation, choice, action, and life. My originating and deepest concern is to address the ancient, distinguished, and overwhelming line of thought, stretching from Thrasymachus to Hobbes to Marx to Foucault, that the most real force in human affairs is power and the addictive desire for power. Every attempt to confute or to mitigate such a claim founders not only on the intense power of observation that yielded the truths that these philosophers sets before us but founders also on failing to see that there is another force driving human behavior, parallel in structure to power. This force is compassion. I endeavor to prove that its structure and that of power share constituent features that makes them pervasive orders of human moral life. In the dimension that we can address in the sphere I am exploring, the agon between them is the largest structure driving our behavior toward one another.

How do these forces effect moral change? Moral change requires the effect of the other moral order, compassion, generally when it is for the better. We might need to use power, but our conscience is in need of compassion. Paying attention, and developing empathy or sympathy as a start, begins the process of accumulating the force of experience that drives us to have a mind and a heart for compassion and to performing acts of compassion. This is the "long experience of obligation": moral obligation not as a command at an instant but as a process of developing one's moral life. Compassion becomes forceful as it gathers strength in us over time until it moves us to act compassionately. The moral order of compassion necessarily preserves alterity and therefore supports the ethical core of the hermeneutic mode of human communications, significance, and normativity. This is to say that our moral forces as persons who are moral agents characterize our history.

I provide a more specific analysis in my description of what I call moral labors—four of them in rough congruence with the four levels of relationality—that are one of the most original contributions I hope my book will make. They concern how we observe events in light of the past that we recall, the work of taking in personhood in full, living within the long experience of obligation, and activity that respects the interdependence of life.

And so history and moral life hang together.

In its final chapter, I consider what sort of universal being there might be that is personal enough to ground the Good Itself. As to this I shall now say nothing more because it remains for me the most uncertain part of my work.

If you ask me how it is that I think such ideas as a focus on universals will help humankind in our present confused situation and our moral and political challenges, my answer is this. Universals reflect the infinite. We are finiter but not passively so. Our finitude is defined by our active creation of meaningful lives between infinity and nothingness. By taking universals into moral thinking, we shall connect ourselves and attend to the infinity end of our finite being as much as to the other end. The two ends interpenetrate, and we need both. I conceive of history and of our behavior as the locus of their interpenetration. As the liberal world fades, we shall be in deeper and longer need of renewed universalism.

This brief exposition doubtless leaves you with issues you want me to clarify or to expand on and with points you wish to challenge. So I now await your questions. Thank you.