

Richard J. Bernstein:
The Afterlife of Learning,
and Learning of the Afterlife

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My first substantial conversation with Dick centered on Aristotle's Sophoclean reflection that no human being should be counted as happy before the moment of their death. While trying to determine the precise subject matter of my paper for a seminar with Claudia Baracchi on *Nicomachean Ethics* in Fall 2000, I was struck by the idea that the completeness or perfection of a happiness worthy of the name—*eudaimonia*, or well-spiritedness—not only could not be attributed to a person in their youth or prime of life, but might be best understood as belonging to a person who has lived well, passed on, and somehow or other still accrues to themselves the virtue of their descendants and their noteworthy deeds.¹ I was then more or less still at the beginning, or at least in the early days, of an engagement with the cosmological character of the good and the good life as Aristotle understands it, and what that might mean for us today, living on the other side of a post-metaphysical divide from Aristotle and the other side of what we often call the disenchantment of the world, following Weber.

Long before we'd waded together into the relevance of different Aristotelian readings for debates about Weber's disenchantment thesis and what would become my doctoral dissertation, Dick and I reflected on an afterlife conception implied by this seemingly offhand comment from Aristotle. We further questioned how seriously, if at all, one should take this and other claims from Aristotle in which he seems to be channeling the common sense of his time and place. When Aristotle endorses the *endoxa*, Dick noted, we often find him validating—or at least refusing to reject—many views which seem not only inaccurate and surely not rational or rationalizable, but also outright wrong in the moral sense. (Aristotle's defense of there being human souls that are "slavish by nature" or that "women lack *logos* in an authoritative sense" spring to mind here.²) Dick cautioned against reading past, or reading through, these moments in that first conversation, in ways and for reasons that puzzled and unsettled me. Until then, my sense was that the best strategy was to "dive for pearls" in the classical works and pick out those moments that feel alive and inspiring, leaving behind the detritus that inevitably fails to speak across the ages. With Dick's help I came to see that approach as a disservice both to the classical author in question and to ourselves: the passages that gnaw at us, that don't sit right, show where the philosophical, *and practical*, work of thinking together in open-ended dialogue is still to be done.

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapters 10-11, 1100a10-b15:

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b13-15 and 1255b11-18: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html>.

This brings us to my last meaningful exchange with Dick, over email, when I embarked on writing a book fashioned as “a critical introduction” to “Hannah Arendt and Politics,” which is now materializing in the *Thinking Politics* series from Edinburgh University Press.³ In our occasional messages about that project, I overcame bouts of profound reluctance and self-doubt in letting my lifelong struggle with Arendt’s texts out into the open. Later, as Dick’s health was seriously compromised while he taught his final seminar, on Arendt, at the New School and completed yet another influential and unique scholarly intervention of his own, the correspondence trailed off. When I had the great honor to (re-)join the Thursday night colloquium at the New School to present a version of the ninth chapter of *Hannah Arendt and Politics* in April 2022, I understood from colleagues that Dick was planning and hoping to join in person. While that sadly did not come to pass, I was fortunate to receive his welcome encouragement and typically generous support virtually: first by email as I decided if I had something meaningful to contribute in the wake of much recent work on Arendt; later as I struggled with the actual content of what to include in brief chapters on issues such as “the Eichmann Controversy” or the debate about Arendt on race and racism; finally, as a felt virtual presence in Zoom that cold and rainy evening in April 2022 when I presented the chapter.

In my book on Arendt, and in the chapter shared at the New School in particular, I once again devoted most of my contribution to the passages in Arendt’s work that troubled me most, least spoke to me, and seemed the hardest to persist in reading with the benefit of hindsight. Without knowing it, really, and surely without being consciously aware of it, Dick’s subtle guidance had pushed me once more to deal with the “hardest case” passages, just as he had pushed me decades earlier with my first monograph-length treatment of a canonical thinker.

In between those two exchanges, over the course of many years, earning a degree, holding different jobs, and starting a family in which he and Carol eagerly played the role of surrogate grandparents hosting our growing kids in their apartment (“I remember that couch,” our son said in watching the scenes where Dick was interviewed for the *Vita Activa* documentary), Dick fostered my development as a thinker-for-myself, as what Arendt (following Lessing and others) liked to describe as a *Selbstdenker*. He did so precisely because he challenged my readings of canonical figures in the Western philosophical tradition, and especially the reception of Greek philosophy in classic and contemporary German philosophy. One principal

³ Maria Robaszekiewicz and Michael Weinman, *Hannah Arendt and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

manifestation of this *Auseinandersetzung* into which Dick most generously invited me is my response to some of his key arguments in *Beyond Objectivity and Relativism*, which to my great honor was published in a volume dedicated to Dick's manifold influences on American philosophy.⁴ Though I did not return to the passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* Dick and I discussed nearly two decades earlier, my chapter hinges profoundly on how we might understand the "hero" of Aristotle's ethical theory. We can understand the hero as a figure of Aristotle's politically and culturally situated moment. I wanted to explore how Dick understands that figure in critical conversation with Gadamer and Habermas, and how I understand that figure in critical conversation with him.

Reflecting on this small subset of the voluminous body (and bodies) of work from Dick's students and the students of his students, I am returned to that offhand comment in *Nicomachean Ethics* about the ways in which happiness belongs perhaps only (or more so) to the most fortunate of the deceased. I do not presume to know Dick's answer to the question of whether it makes sense to question the condition of his soul now that he has left us to carry on his project of thinking-in-plural without his physical company. But I do believe that in raising this question in his absent presence and in the company of those fortunate to learn with and from him, I have—perhaps only belatedly—come to understand a bit better why he insisted on taking that passage more seriously than I was inclined to do more than twenty years ago. This may be just another sign of his inestimable and enduring influence on one person among the many fortunate to have been his student and co-inquirer. It goes without saying that Dick will be missed; yet, it is just as clear that he is very much still with us whenever *we* enter into serious thought, experiencing that first-person plurality in and through his intellectual company

⁴ Michael Weinman, "Phronēsis in a Post-metaphysical Age," in *Thinking the Plural: Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy*, eds., Marcia Morgan and Megan Craig (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017) 3-20.