

# The Practical Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein

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## 1.

Richard Bernstein was my dissertation advisor, and it might be argued that he was a delinquent advisor. He continually encouraged me to pursue ideas, ask questions, read more, write up arguments, then read more, ask more questions, and write up different arguments. After several years, he said in his tough Brooklyn way, “Scott, you just have to write this thing.” Problematically, rather than training me to exist in the professional academic world, Dick was more concerned with teaching me to *think* (not that the two are entirely incompatible). He did this not by relaying arguments by Hegel, Dewey, Gadamer, or Wittgenstein, but by teaching me to *care* about ideas—because ideas have real-world consequences. I can hear his fist slamming down on the seminar table in punctuation of that thought. As important as his lessons on Hegel, Dewey, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein were, most impactful for me was having him as a model for what it meant to do philosophy.

## 2.

Throughout his career, Bernstein was known as a bridge builder, writing articles and books that brought thinkers from divergent traditions into conversation.<sup>1</sup> He worried philosophers too often got caught up on stylistic differences, which prohibited exchanging ideas. So his work facilitated dialogue by emphasizing shared concerns rather than disagreements. At the same time, he detected a deeper rift within the study of philosophy. Philosophy, he lamented, too often becomes disconnected from the lives of those who study it. In one of his last books, *Ironic Life*, published in 2016, he describes the current dilemma: “Philosophy as an academic discipline is in danger of becoming barren, pedantic, and irrelevant.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout his life, Bernstein championed another approach. One of his earliest essays, published in 1959 just after defending his dissertation, expounds upon the tenets of John Dewey’s philosophy. It begins by stating that philosophy’s “function is to clarify the presuppositions, beliefs, and knowledge of a living culture, to criticize this material, organize it, test its coherence, and make explicit its consequences. Philosophy does not have a merely negative function; it has the perennial task of envisioning and imaginatively

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<sup>1</sup> Bernstein comments on this reputation himself in: Richard J. Bernstein, “The Romance of Philosophy,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 81, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein, *Ironic Life* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016) 125.

projecting new possibilities and directions.”<sup>3</sup> As Bernstein understands it, the life of thought is not disconnected from the lives of those who engage in it.

We could glean Bernstein’s ethical concerns from the titles of many of his books, *Abuse of Evil*, *Radical Evil*, and *Violence: Thinking Without Banisters*.<sup>4</sup> But we could also say of Bernstein what he writes of Derrida, that while his work lacks a “straightforward analysis of such concepts as right, good, obligation, justice, and virtue [...] there is a way of reading Derrida’s [Bernstein’s] texts so that we can see his ethical-political horizon pervading and influencing virtually everything he has written, everything that bears his signature.”<sup>5</sup> I venture to say that Bernstein reads Derrida in this way because, despite his idiosyncratic prose and circuitous argumentation, he takes Derrida’s core concerns to pivot, as do his own, on thinking through our lives with others. He argues that for Derrida, ethics was not *an* area of philosophy amongst others, but the undercurrent of all philosophical thought. On many occasions, Bernstein traces this approach back to Plato and Aristotle, for whom “gaining theoretical knowledge of the cosmos and our place in the cosmos is for the purpose of achieving concrete practical wisdom.”<sup>6</sup> As such, no domain of philosophy is altogether free from practical interests.

In his presidential address to the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 1988, Bernstein addresses the yawning divide between analytic and continental philosophy. As a response to “our present situation in philosophy,” as he puts it, he offers a pragmatist vision of philosophy that encourages dialogue.<sup>7</sup> He articulates this “pragmatic ethos by adumbrating the themes of anti-foundationalism, fallibilism, the social character of the self and the regulative ideal of a critical community, contingency, and pluralism.”<sup>8</sup> What is clear from his presentation of these themes is that each has its ethical implications.

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<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, “Knowledge, Value, and Freedom,” in *John Dewey and the Experimental Spirit in Philosophy*, ed. Charles Hendel (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959) 63.

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2005). Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2002). Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking Without Banisters* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, “Serious Play: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Jacques Derrida,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 1, no.2 (1987) 94.

<sup>6</sup> Bernstein, *Ironic Life*, 103.

<sup>7</sup> Bernstein, “Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 63, no. 3 (1989) 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

These core themes are not limited to Bernstein's engagement with pragmatism. For instance, in the Derrida essay quoted above, Bernstein pushes against criticisms that Derrida's deconstructionism leads to problematic ethical consequences, insisting that its fundamental move is a humanistic one: to uncover the prejudices of our thinking. Derrida, as Bernstein describes him, "has an uncanny (*unheimlich*) ability to show us that at the heart of what we take to be familiar, native, at home—where we think we can find our center—lurks (is concealed and repressed) what is unfamiliar, strange, and uncanny."<sup>9</sup> This revelation resonates with Bernstein's commitment to anti-foundationalism, which demands that all forms of certainty must be questioned. Dewey proposes that modern civilization has become entranced by this *quest for certainty*, but warns that this blinds us to the views of others, ignores the contingency of our own views, and so hampers thought.<sup>10</sup> While Bernstein acknowledges that the "center" which Derrida's philosophy aspires to decenter has direct implications for "ethical discourse, *insofar as* it partakes in the search for an *archē*, a first principle to 'ground' moral action," his exposition of the ethical-political horizon of Derrida's work allows him to argue for the ethical implications of thinking itself.<sup>11</sup>

As Bernstein sees it, resisting the *quest for certainty* entails a commitment to fallibilism. This encourages us to see our beliefs as "interpretive, tentative, always subject to correction."<sup>12</sup> Such an attitude is not merely for the sake of kindness or equity, but necessary for the pursuit of truth, since progress lies in holding one's beliefs to scrutiny. This leads to another of Bernstein's pragmatic themes, the fostering of a critical community: "It is only by the serious encounter with what is other, different, and alien that we can hope to determine what is idiosyncratic, limited, and partial."<sup>13</sup> This anti-Cartesian conception of philosophy apprises us to the dangers of thinking in isolation. Since in isolation the prejudices and blindspots of our thinking remain unchecked, fostering communities of knowers is not incidental but integral to the very task of inquiry. This leads Bernstein to develop the concept of an *engaged fallibilistic pluralism*; "such a pluralistic ethos places new responsibilities upon each of us."<sup>14</sup> This requires, he continues, that "one must always attempt to be responsive to

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<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, "Serious Play: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Jacques Derrida," 94.

<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 4, 1925 - 1953: The Quest for Certainty*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

what the other is saying and showing.”<sup>15</sup> We might summarize this lesson as promoting epistemic humility. It is incumbent upon us to recognize the contingency of our view of the world and so the possibility of something arising that would throw this view of things into disarray.

Anticipating objections, Bernstein clarifies that stressing the necessity of community need not commit us to a “Peircian conviction that—in the long run—there will be a convergence of inquiry.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, Bernstein emphatically asserts the opposite. Referencing Dewey’s end of inquiry, he writes: “The mark of knowledge is its warranted assertability in inquiry, not its intrinsic certitude. Furthermore, there is an implicit reference to the future in all knowledge, for future consequences clarify and may necessitate a revision of our knowledge; they may show that what was once taken as warranted is no longer justified.”<sup>17</sup> The future signals not the finality of inquiry but a horizon that ceaselessly recedes as we progress. That intellectual pursuits continually renew themselves should, he thought, inspire us.

The pragmatic themes Bernstein enumerates evidence the ethical-political horizon of his approach to philosophy; that is, in striving toward knowledge, we must acknowledge our dependence on others. This conclusion seems to vindicate the description of philosophy he approvingly wrote of in that early paper on Dewey: “the role of philosophy in contemporary civilization” lies in “clarifying confusion and creatively envisioning new possibilities.”<sup>18</sup> Such a task could have no end, inasmuch as its activity is consonant with a human life.

### 3.

After having briefly reviewed some of Bernstein’s core philosophical commitments, I want to conclude by recounting how these manifest in my relationship with him as a teacher, mentor, and friend because, for him, philosophy was alive and breathed through these personal relationships. (Because this latter portion of the essay is personal rather than academic, for the remainder of this essay, I switch from referring to Richard Bernstein as Bernstein to referring to him as Dick, as he was known to his students and friends.)

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Bernstein, “Knowledge, Value, and Freedom,” 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

For those who took a seminar with Dick, the feeling of gathering at the seminar table in conversation over Hegel's *Science of Logic* or Gadamer's *Truth and Method* are not easily forgotten. I think about moments from these courses often as I lead my own seminars. Dick taught me how to be a professor, how to take students through arguments with fidelity to the text, but always with an eye to what really matters—*die Sache Selbst*. Hear his fist on the table once again. Part of the way he did this was by telling stories that demonstrated that philosophy was not airy speculation, but grounded in real life. More than once, I heard Dick quote Arendt as saying that the “only way to teach people to think is to infect them with the perplexities.”<sup>19</sup> This means illustrating the power of thinking in making sense of the world and illuminating new possibilities. Most of all, he taught me how to care about students, their ideas, and how these ideas connected to their interests and what motivated them outside of the classroom. He provoked us, infected us with perplexity, and by so doing, strived to awaken in us *our* responsibility as thinkers, citizens, and human beings.

Being lucky enough to work as his research assistant for several years allowed us to develop a personal relationship. Dick and I spent a lot of time together, moving boxes of books when he and Carol renovated their apartment, writing retrospective syllabi after the class was finished because they were demanded by the provost's office, and sharing meals. We would regularly go for lunches or dinners in which we would seamlessly transition from philosophy to our families to politics. There used to be a Thai place on 20th street we would frequent. He would look at the menu, think about what he was in the mood for, ask me what I was going to order—drunken noodles—then indubitably, he would order pineapple fried rice. Ironically, over dinner, we would philosophize about habits and freedom. We would finish the meal with iced lychees, and he would reminisce about growing up in Brooklyn or his days at the University of Chicago.

Of course, I would be painting a rather obscure picture of Dick's temperament if I only described him in such gentle terms. Once over salad, Dick abruptly shifted our conversation to a paper I asked him to read on Aristotle's notion of choice in the *Nicomachean Ethics* by saying, “Now about your essay--I am not convinced by any of it.” The softness of his voice was gone. He now leaned over the table full of the intensity of philosophical passion. We spent the next two hours painfully going line by line through the article. But of course, this too, was part of the way he cared.

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<sup>19</sup> Brad Evans and Richard J. Bernstein, “The Intellectual Life of Violence,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/opinion/the-intellectual-life-of-violence.html>.

When my wife and I were planning our wedding, we asked Dick to officiate. He and Carol flew down to New Orleans and spent a few days with a small cohort of friends from the New School whom I tried to convince that New Orleans was the center of the world by taking them to hear jazz, eat po-boys, and soak up the city's history. At our wedding, he was *as* excited as anyone there. And during the ceremony, he quoted from Plato's *Phaedrus* on the growth of love between individuals.

I spent many summers visiting Dick and Carol in the Adirondacks. Our last visit was before COVID, but I got the chance to take our daughter Esme there when she was two. Dick held her hand while she explored the house and the forest, coaxed her into the Ausable River, and encouraged her to pet the goats at a nearby farm. Above my desk at Sarah Lawrence, I have a picture from that trip of Dick reading *Where the Wild Things Are* to Esme—they are looking at each other, his hand outstretched, fingers spread, and he is asking her a question as if he were in a seminar and working through a difficult passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology*. There is both a kindness and a seriousness in that picture that captures how I understand the friend I knew and loved. And whose pedagogical spirit I strive to emulate.

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