

# Friendship, Philosophy, and Democratic Practice

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Dick Bernstein taught us how to be friends. In a windowless room just off the escalator in what had been an old department store on the corner of 5th Avenue and 14th Street, but which, by the spring of 1992, had been transformed into the home of the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, Richard Bernstein held a seminar on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. There we arrived alone, but strangely already with one another, confronted with an almost impenetrable text, and guided by a generous teacher who had an infectious passion for allowing a text to orient us toward truth. "The world is all that is the case."<sup>1</sup> So begins the *Tractatus*, and so began our friendship. In calling on Rick to do the first presentation on the notion of "world" in the *Tractatus*, Dick first called Rick to Chris's attention as a colleague he should get to know. At the other end of the text and of the seminar, Chris presented on "the mystical" and the silence that marks the limits of language. Although we didn't realize it then, these terms were to become the poles around which our friendship flourished. On the one hand, we strive to practice a philosophy called upon to speak to and about the world. On the other hand, we share the recognition that philosophy has limits and that the world is not entirely graspable by conceptual tools. As we sought to make sense of the world together, we came to recognize the limits of the conceptual and the vitality of what cannot fully be articulated. In teaching philosophy, Dick taught us the meaning of friendship, the importance of friendship for doing philosophy, and the vitality of philosophy for democratic life.

"If you want to smell incense, you can go out there on 14th Street, but if you want to do *philosophy*, you'll come in here and *sweat*," [Bernstein] said as he banged his fist on the table."<sup>2</sup> Dick always oriented us to the text - to what was written and to the tensions that appear there. He refused simple solutions, identified conflicting passages, and followed his beloved Hegel in tarrying with the negative. In this practice, he gathered a community around the text, a community inquiring into a truth that shows itself there and appears between those attempting to understand it together. This orientation to the truth as it appears in dialogue among a community of inquirers is constitutive of reality itself. For, as Peirce points out, "the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein and Kevin C. Klement, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus | Side-by-Side-by-Side-Edition | Ludwig Wittgenstein," accessed September 6, 2022, <https://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/>.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Friedlander, "A Philosopher from New York," in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2004) 349. Friedlander is here quoting a former student whose story resonates with our experience.

of COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase in knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Dick’s philosophical commitment to the way in which reality appears and, in fact, emerges *only through* a community of inquirers, is exhibited throughout his work and teaching. This is always joined by a Gadamerian insight that appeals “...to a concept of truth that (pragmatically speaking) amounts to what can be argumentatively validated by the community of interpreters who open themselves to what tradition ‘says to us’.”<sup>4</sup> In that seminar, as we gathered around a text that spoke to and broke with a tradition, we came to experience how, in this joining of pragmatism and hermeneutics, a notion of friendship is at play: the interpreter as friend of the text, the community as friend of the truth, and a community of friends striving not only to understand reality, but to live together better in light of the truth the text reveals. And, although we didn’t fully realize it at the time, Dick Bernstein’s way of doing philosophy would sustain a friendship between us that has deepened and evolved over more than 30 years.

### 1. Philosophy as Friendship

It would be difficult, indeed, to overestimate the role that friendship played in Dick’s philosophical practice. He would frequently begin a discussion of, for example, Habermas, by saying “My good friend Jürgen...” The number of Dick’s friends whose thought had an explicit impact on his philosophy is impressive: Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Albrecht Wellmer, Agnes Heller, Paul Weiss, Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, just to name a few. It is clear that friendship was a central feature of Dick’s thought. And it is also clear that, for him, friendship did not mean agreement.

Rorty provides an example. According to Robert Westbrook their relationship was “a warm, even affectionate, fraternal bond—though not...one without significant philosophical and political disagreements, vigorously expressed.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, vigorous disagreements expressed in the context of a trusting friendship open pathways to truth too often closed by antagonistic arguments between people who

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<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Peirce, Nathan Houser, and Christian J. W. Kloesel, *The Essential Peirce*: Selected Philosophical Writings, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 52.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983) 154.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Westbrook, “Pragmatists and Politics: The Richards Bernstein and Rorty,” *Raritan*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2013): 104.

have no commitment to one another or to the friendship that sustains them.

For Dick, friendship was not merely a personal issue but frames what he considered to be the most fruitful way of doing philosophy. The duality of joy and agonism allows philosophy to be dialogical. Agonism brings forth a struggle, a recognition that truth is achieved in community. While Dick frequently uses “agonism” as a synonym for “antagonism,” nothing could be more Bernsteinian than to insist upon a distinction between “antagonism,” which points to the corrosive aspects of adversarial confrontation, and “agonism,” which names playful contestation and suggests dialogical struggle toward a common ground. Joy animates this playfulness that arises from the shared pursuit of the good as a regulative ideal. Dick recognizes the joyful side of philosophy as friendship in Rorty’s conception of the good society as:

...one where we will play, a type of *jouissance* where there is a non-violent tolerant celebration of our capacities for making and self-creation, where we would abandon the “spirit of seriousness” and no longer think it is important to hold positions about “Truth,” “Objectivity,” “Rationality,” and so on. It is a vision where we all become poets who have learned to live with contingency, preferably “strong poets.”<sup>6</sup>

Although Bernstein will not, of course, fully endorse Rorty’s vision, he does embrace play as a non-violent celebration and joy as an abandonment of arid, sterile seriousness. In addition, like Rorty, Bernstein’s thinking is deeply rooted in a recognition of human contingency and finitude. And it is this recognition that brings Bernstein to an affirmation of dialogue as central to philosophy and of friendship as a site for the appearance of truth. Bernstein, in the spirit of agonistic friendship, however, refuses to relinquish all appeals to the universal, since he finds in such appeals the erotic pull of a regulative ideal. This is at the heart of his criticism of both Lyotard and Rorty when he goes on to write,

...there is something disingenuous in Lyotard’s and Rorty’s reiterated celebration of contingency and a plurality of forms of life. They presumably oppose all forms of universality and are suspicious of the

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<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992) 234.

reconciliation of differences. Yet they both advocate a type of plurality and contingency in which there is universal non-violent play. The type of “reconciliation” they advocate is one in which we learn to live in peace with incommensurable vocabularies and forms of life. But they never thematize this legitimate *universal* regulative ideal.<sup>7</sup>

Play is precisely what characterizes Dick’s understanding of philosophy as dialogue. There is a necessary “to-and-fro” between oneself and another, even when that other is a text. This play, however, is neither an annihilation nor a reconciliation of differences, but rather seeks “a common ground in which we can understand our differences.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the way Dick disagrees with Rorty and Lyotard about the power of the universal is a good example of the distinction between the agonistic and antagonistic postures to which we gestured above.

In his 1988 Presidential Address to the APA, “Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds,” Bernstein distinguishes between two styles of philosophy, the one, confrontational, the other, dialogical, and he outlines the affordances and limitations of both. The confrontational style is antagonistic when it views the other as an opponent in order to expose the weaknesses of the position they hold. It is agonistic when it is “never satisfied with vague claims, it helps to pinpoint issues in dispute, and it can expose difficulties that need to be confronted.”<sup>9</sup> The dialogical style is frivolous when it sacrifices understanding for agreement and seeks reconciliation without precision. It is generous and generative when it “grasps the other’s position in the *strongest* possible light. One must always attempt to be responsive to what the other is saying and showing. This requires imagination, sensitivity and perfecting hermeneutical skills.”<sup>10</sup>

The openness required by dialogue arises from Dick’s insistence, following Peirce, that our epistemic commitments must be always open to correction or even rejection. He calls this position “fallibilism.”

In this situation, the pragmatic legacy is especially relevant, in particular the call to nurture the type of community and solidarity where there is an engaged fallibilistic pluralism—one that is based upon

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

mutual respect, where we are willing to risk our own prejudgments, are open to listening and learning from others, and we respond to others with responsiveness and responsibility.<sup>11</sup>

Genuine friendship is conditioned precisely by such engaged fallibilistic pluralism rooted in mutual respect and the courage to put our own prejudices at risk. Friendship opens us to one another and to the truth that might arise between us. Friendship is a risk. There is the risk that my “certainties” are challenged by the other. But there is also the greater risk that truth will never emerge unless we have the courage to open ourselves to the possibilities of friendship. Since, for Dick, it is through dialogue that the truth emerges, this dialogue that is at the heart of pluralism orients us toward truth—or rather, truths—that are capable of gathering us together in enriching ways. This dialogue requires an openness to the other, an openness that uncovers differences. Therefore, dialogue is based on friendship. Indeed, as Bernstein himself has said, “[w]e sometimes forget the prominence that friendship once played in understanding ethical and political life—friendship that is not incompatible with, but rather becomes enlivened through, conflict and differences.”<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Striving to Live Together Better

Since friendship is dialogical and since genuine dialogue is conditioned by a pluralism that is fallible, it provides a model for our ethical and political life. A democratic ethos requires a contestation of values, but one that plays out on the basis of a shared commitment to truth and to the good. For Bernstein and for us, the concept and the reality of friendship nurtures a practical way of living capable of enlivening democratic communities. The concern for practice and, indeed, for democracy, stands at the heart of Dick’s thinking from beginning to end. In his continuous efforts to bring thinkers into dialogue with one another, to invite them to the stage of friendship, Bernstein always seeks common ground between them without reducing the differences that separate them. He captures the significance of this hermeneutical approach for human *praxis* when he writes in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>12</sup> Sheila Greeve Davaney and Warren Frisina (eds.), *The Pragmatic Century: Conversations with Richard J. Bernstein* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) 187.

It is this common ground that is most relevant to us and that enables us to grasp what might be called the modern (or post-modern) paradox concerning the prospects of human praxis—that the type of solidarity, communicative interaction, dialogue, and judgment required for the concrete realization of praxis already presupposes incipient forms of community life that such praxis seeks to foster.<sup>13</sup>

Bernstein's teaching, the relationship he taught us to cultivate with the text, and the friendship that began between us in his classroom, foster precisely the kind of solidarity, trust, communicative dialogue, and play of difference that cultivate what Bernstein called the democratic *ethos*.<sup>14</sup> This *ethos* suggests that the very practices that will bring about democracy are already conditioned by the first awakenings of a democratic community. In other words, striving for democracy requires at the same time a democratic way of living together.

The current global crisis in democracy is in part rooted in our incapacity to cultivate friendship across and even *through* differences. In fact, the challenge is deeper still, since there seems to be no shared commitment to truth as a regulative ideal capable of shaping our life in common. Our impoverished democratic condition rests in part on the lack of ideals that could be regulative of something like the pursuit of the common good.

In considering the Platonic conception of the universal good and its relation to truth, Aristotle famously said “while both [the truth and one's friends] are loved, it is a sacred thing to give the higher honor to the truth.”<sup>15</sup> Here, Aristotle exposes the importance of both truth and friendship, but he recognizes that they could come into conflict. In such a conflict, Aristotle argues that the higher duty is to the truth. In so doing, he transforms the good from an abstract ideal to a regulative ideal capable of calling us to incipient forms of community that nurture meaningful human lives. However, he does not reach this ultimate conclusion. Plato, however, does give voice to the power of the truth as a regulative ideal. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates, facing his own death, presents arguments for the immortality of the soul and encourages his friends this way:

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<sup>13</sup> Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, 175.

<sup>14</sup> Bernstein writes: “There is no democracy—in theory or in practice—without a democratic *ethos*.” See, Richard J. Bernstein, “The Retrieval of the Democratic Ethos. Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges - Part I,” *Cardozo Law Review*, vol 17, no. 4-5 (1995096): 1146.

<sup>15</sup> Joe Sachs, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, The Focus Philosophical Library (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002) 1096a16-17.

But as for all of you, if you're persuaded by me and give little thought to Socrates and much more to the truth, you must agree with me if I seem to you to say what's true; and if I don't, you must strain against me with every argument you've got, taking care that I don't, out of eagerness, go off, having deceived both myself and you, like a bee that's left its stinger behind.<sup>16</sup>

Here Socrates empowers his friends to use their own judgment in discerning the truth and warns them against his own speech defending the immortality of the soul lest, in his eagerness to affirm something certain and permanent, he stings them with a delusion that the good to which they strive exists in an eternal realm beyond our finite human lives. In his own philosophical practice, Socrates has gathered his friends around him in the palpable face of his own death in order to embody a relationship to the truth that is capable of holding them accountable to one another. He does not invite them to worship an abstract ideal, but to consider how a concern for the truth orients them at once to the good and to one another. The good here, however, has become a regulative ideal, an erotic principle that gathers them together into a community of friendship committed to bringing the good to life. But Socrates is quick to point out that this community requires that differences be acknowledged, that friends challenge one another, and that the truth be that which orients us to the mutual pursuit of the good.

When Socrates instructs his friends to "strain against me with every argument you have," he is appealing to the positive sense of struggle that we named "agonistic" above. The dialogue among friends, Socrates points out, is not without a playful contestation, a kind of working together in an effort to align our lives with the truth. Here, what Bernstein called the "confrontational" practice of philosophy dovetails with the "dialogical" practice in a way that is instructive to us as we consider the ways in which philosophical friendship might come to undergird a democratic *ethos*. This is the ever-present pragmatic spirit of Bernstein's thought, connected now to philosophical friendship as central to democratic life.

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<sup>16</sup> Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem (trans.), *Plato: Phaedo* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company, 1998) 91C.



### 3. Friendship and the Democratic *Ethos*

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that our friendship has its roots in the spirit of democratic friendship that animated Dick's teaching in that seminar on the *Tractatus* so long ago. If Bernstein's seminar was, among other things, a site for the cultivation of friendship, it is precisely because of Dick's democratic orientation to the truth. As Dick always returned to the text and required us to orient our relationships to one another in light of the way truth articulated itself there, so too must citizens in a democracy always return to the question of truth as a way to organize our communal lives. Indeed, the truth itself can only shape democratic life if it is animated by a concern for the good. Contemporary politics has come to be perverted by bad-faith appeals to the "truth" completely unmoored from a concern for the common good. The effect of this bad-faith is undemocratic precisely because it lacks a spirit of friendship among citizens, a playfulness conditioned by a deep recognition of human contingency and fallibility. Such a playfulness is characterized by what Dick called "engaged, fallibilistic, pluralism." He identified these cultivated habits as constitutive of a democratic *ethos* capable of calling us to new forms of living well together.

Such lives, to be truly democratic, would need to be moored to the truth, not as a foundation, but as a regulative principle capable of guiding our relationships with one another. Foundational appeals to the truth too easily become dogmatic and devolve into antipathy. While foundationalism appeals to one's certainty about the truth and about truths, it does so by flattening differences among democratic participants. The difference appears here only as absolute otherness in such a way that there is no common struggle for understanding, no common striving for truth, no concern for the common good. By mooring our relationships with one another to the truth, we cultivate habits of democratic friendship that empower us to address the major challenges of our time. The recognition of contingency that is at the heart of this friendship also brings along with it a sense of urgency. The general sense of malaise, depletion, and exhaustion are symptoms of a society devoid of democratic friendship. Dick was nothing if not courageous in his consistent demand that we resist succumbing to our exhaustion and that we take heart in our shared pursuit of a truth that shows itself if only we are willing to seek it in friendship. As Dick never tired of reminding us, the work of philosophy and the task of democracy are not for the faint of heart. To learn this, we had to stop being enticed by the sweet smell of incense on 14th street and roll up our sleeves to enter that windowless room just off the escalator. There we began to learn how to pursue the truth and the good as regulative ideals

that emerge in friendship and not without a good deal of sweat.

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