

His Voice in My Head

Rachael Cayley

University of Toronto



Volume 7 · Number 1 · 2023 · Pages 55 - 59

I'm not even sure what to call him as I write this. I never actually stopped calling him Professor Bernstein. Dick seemed too informal; Richard, as we all knew, was off limits. "Only my mother ...," he would say to those who sought that middle ground. Despite having said his name hundreds of times, I did wonder, on the morning of 9/11, if I had been pronouncing it wrong all along. I was in far-away Vancouver with a tiny baby, listening to his daughter Andrea on WNYC. She was reporting from Brooklyn; I was finding some comfort in the familiarity of her cadence. Even as I wondered about their different pronunciation of their surname, I imagined him shrugging, "BernstEEN, BernstEIN," clearly a distinction without difference, as he loved to say.

Writing was the way I first encountered Bernstein. Desperately worried about starting graduate school in a new discipline and a new country, I read his then-latest book *The New Constellation* in preparation for taking his course of the same name.¹ I quickly learned that I needn't have read it all in advance; the course was a careful unpacking of its ideas. But I'm glad I did because its graceful writing was an early gift. I would go on to read many writers whose writing made me doubt whether I had chosen the right academic path, but Bernstein's writing made philosophy seem like an activity deeply rooted in sense-making. Arguably, that is what we all strive for in writing; he was just better at it than most. Consider this quote: "It is never quite clear whether Hegel's narrative is that of a divine comedy, where all alienation and self-estrangement are superseded in a grand *Aufhebung*, or of a human tragedy in which we are haunted by the image of a new form of *Sittlichkeit* and human community but where there is only the 'highway of despair'."² This sentence—which manages its many moving parts with ease—offers clarity without oversimplification. While rejecting the possibility of a single, indisputable interpretation, he is offering a legible account of an ongoing tension.

As writers, we all exist within traditions: traditions within disciplines, within geographical confines, within languages. The way we write is also influenced by the norms of our teachers and by the exemplars we take for ourselves. None of us writes without reflecting that rich context. Bernstein's roots may have inclined him to lucidity; many of the thinkers he loved wrote in an accessible vein. But he also loved Hegel. He taught his Hegel seminar with empathy for our challenges but with zero patience for any complaint that willful obscurity was to blame. That, to me, is the essence of his approach to academic writing: strive to offer clarity as a *writer* while nonetheless embracing the work of creating clarity as a *reader*. As academic writers, we all live with the tension surrounding the creation of meaning in a text: where

should the line be drawn between the work of the writer and that of the reader? Bernstein navigated this tension by assuming that responsibility as a reader and then using his writing to elicit insights from those texts that leave more of that work to the reader.

Although he was my dissertation advisor, for many years, our dealings were more administrative than academic. Since he was my boss, I had to go to him with the troubles I encountered as I tried to advise a large and somewhat unruly collection of philosophy graduate students. Twenty-something me couldn't understand what I was doing wrong: I had read the regulations; I had attended the relevant meeting; I had designed transparent procedures; I had crafted painstaking emails. Why wasn't everyone doing what they were supposed to do? He would invariably say, "The trouble with you, Rachael, is that you're a rationalist." Not in the philosophical sense, of course. The turn he wanted me to make—to lessen my own frustration and to keep me from bothering him so much—was towards *expecting* people to behave irrationally. And when fifty-something me wonders why my careful plans and detailed communications haven't made my world run smoothly, I say it to myself: "The trouble with you, Rachael, ...". It always makes me feel better.

Bernstein hadn't been at the New School that long when I arrived. He was still in the process of reshaping the philosophy department according to his priorities. It wasn't a universally popular endeavour, but he recognized that academic units need champions. It's not enough to love philosophy; someone has to make sure that there are spaces where philosophy can be practiced. "Keeping the lights on," he always would say. His fierce advocacy wasn't a compromise but rather a commitment deep enough to justify all the administrative wrangling. I'm sure he didn't love that work: the endless meetings, the fights over funding, the bureaucratic inanities. Indeed, he would often say, "there's a technical philosophical term for the New School: this place is completely *meshuga*." He did, however, love what his labour made possible. For many academics, the best jobs are those that have the lowest administrative burden. He certainly adored writing and teaching and engaging with his philosophical peers, but he also knew that someone had to fight for the best version of the department. When he would tell us about his father convincing people to buy furniture on 14th Street, he was also telling us that he was more than willing to do the work to convince people that *this* department needed to exist. I'm sure he sometimes called it "the *philosophy* department," but in my memory it was always "the department," with the *a* elongated as only he could. He loved the department, where it came from, what it meant, and what it could be.

After finishing my PhD—something that only happened because he insisted that I was ready, that I had read enough, that what I had written was genuinely good—I moved away from philosophy. Although my professional path had changed, I could still hear his voice in my head. As I learned to work with other people’s texts, as an editor and then as a teacher of writing, I would often think of what he had shown me about writing. I also found that many of the things he taught me ended up informing my life more broadly. The idea that has cut the deepest is probably his maxim about people and fear. He would always say that the key to any person is what they are afraid of. We instinctively grasp this in our closest relationships; when you pick up a trembling toddler to walk past a dog or text your mother as soon as the plane lands, you are acknowledging what they are afraid of. Needless to say, this notion was embedded in his philosophical analyses; “Cartesian anxiety” is a deft way of characterizing the role of fear in philosophy. This question can also inform professional relationships; once you know what people are afraid of, you are better able to work with them. When someone tells you that something is a slippery slope, they’re not objectively identifying a slope, they’re telling you how much they’re afraid of slipping. There are so many common fears within professional spaces: fear of untenable precedents, of unreciprocated effort, of unmanageable decentralization, of undue generosity. His reminder to understand people as motivated by their fears often nudges me away from conflict and towards empathy.

I wouldn’t have expected that his death would hit me so hard. You can’t be surprised by the death of a ninety year old; his life by any measure was so well lived; and I’d been in touch with him only rarely in recent years. Yet an early morning text made time suddenly compress, as though he was someone I still saw all the time. Obviously his voice in my head means so much to me, a touchstone for how to think and live and work with others. I am grateful for these memories and grateful for this opportunity to share them.

Bibliography

Bernstein, Richard J. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science Hermeneutics and Praxis*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

----- *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*. Boston: The MIT Press, 1992.