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Philosophy Social Criticism 2000 26: 23

DOI: 10.1177/019145370002600402

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Nikolas Kompridis

Reorienting critique

From ironist theory to transformative practice

Abstract In this paper I examine problems besetting forms of philosophical and social critique that are motivated by the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and normatively oriented to the goal of ‘unmasking’. I argue that there is an urgent need to correct the one-sided emphasis on ‘unmasking’, and we can do this by reorienting critique to the practice of individual and social transformation.

The argument goes like this. The practice of unmasking critique has split off from utopian projects in whose service it was originally placed, and has become the vehicle of a self-consuming, practice-crippling skepticism that – from Friedrich von Schlegel to Paul de Man and Richard Rorty – goes by the name of *irony* or *ironist theory*. Postmodernism, in one of its aspects, is the latest form of this skepticism. I interpret postmodernism as the manifestation of a *crisis of confidence* (in our ideals and in our agency) and as an *ironization of critique*. Drawing upon Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault, I reformulate the normative demands of critique such that its practice avoids the problem of *self-reference* while responding to the problem of *self-reassurance*.

Key words confidence · critique · irony · postmodernism · reason · skepticism

I

In a much-cited passage from the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant asserted that ‘[o]ur age is properly the age of critique, and to critique everything must submit’.¹ Ever since this assertion was made it has provoked the question: to what is something submitted when it is submitted to critique? And just what does

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM • vol 26 no 4 • pp. 23–47

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[0191-4537(200007)26:4;23–47;013095]

PSC

submission involve? In other words: to what are we giving ourselves over when we give ourselves over to critique? For Kant, to submit something to critique means to submit it to 'reason's *free* and *open* examination'.² To submit something to critique, then, is to submit it to reason – to reason interpreted as a non-coercive medium of public justification. If something can be justified in light of reason's 'free and open examination' – be it a contestable cognitive, moral, or aesthetic claim, a contestable social practice or cultural tradition – it deserves our respect (*Achtung*). To say that something deserves our respect is to say that it is something which we can reflectively endorse. Any submission to the critical force of reason, however, would be immediately disqualified if it were not freely motivated. When we submit to reason we are not submitting to a power outside ourselves; we are submitting willingly to a process of *self*-criticism. Critique is continuous with self-critique – continuous with a process of self-correction. Even reason must submit to critique, through which submission reason becomes a self-correcting and self-reforming practice. Kant's 'critique of pure reason' instances both reason's need of, and its capacity for, self-correction and self-reform. Critique, then, is the medium of reason's self-education, and the expression of reason's power of self-determination. And so we can reflectively endorse our submission to the critical force of reason, and entrust ourselves to it, because reason does not exempt itself from self-critique.

It is still insufficiently appreciated just how radically Kant reinterpreted the meaning of modern reason, and this is due in no small measure to the long-standing habit of focusing on Kant's *Erkenntnistheorie* at the expense of his *Vernunftkritik*.³ The change in meaning that Kant initiated was so profound that we must speak of a different picture of reason, one which seeks to break free of the Cartesian and empiricist picture of reason pervasive in his time, and still pervasive in our own. Central to this picture is the idea that reason is the instrument by which we objectify and control inner and outer nature, and master and police the activity that allows us to form mental 'representations' of ourselves and the world. The picture of reason introduced by Kant, on the other hand, disjoins reason from practices of objectification and control, and conjoins it to practices of freedom and (self-) critique. The practices of reason, freedom and critique mutually qualify and constrain one another and, much like the legs of a tripod, they mutually support one another. Should one leg fail, the other two collapse along with it.

In different ways, and with different emphases, a number of highly influential contemporary philosophers – e.g. John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas and Hilary Putnam – have tried to retrieve this Kantian picture of reason, divested of Kant's most untenable metaphysical assumptions, particularly his purism, and reconstructed in detranscendentalized form. But however we may go about it, Kant's fundamental insight into the

interdependence of reason, freedom and critique cannot be retrieved naively. Certainly, the audience for whom reason's 'eternal and immutable laws'⁴ can be justified has become much smaller – especially if we are speaking of practical reason. Since Kant's time, we have acquired an acute awareness of, and sensitivity to, historical contingencies and cultural differences; and, we have acquired a better understanding of, and a healthier respect for, the plural, weakly incommensurable worlds in which we dwell.⁵ Although Kant initiated a new understanding of reason through an innovative critique of reason, the subsequent course of critique did not and could not stay within the pristine grooves established by Kant. From Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche to Heidegger, Adorno and Foucault, a much more suspicious and much more skeptical form of the critique of reason developed – a form of critique that scrutinized much more carefully than ever before reason's claim to be self-determining, and tested much more extensively its capacity for self-criticism and self-reform. Blending some well-known remarks of Marx and Foucault's, one could say that since Kant's time we've come to see not only that reason has a history, but that its various incarnations in history display a rather disturbing pattern of failing to be rational.⁶

The deeply entrenched skepticism towards reason that is so ubiquitous a feature of our millennially challenged age is the product of almost two centuries of relentless, virulent critique. And it is quite clearly impossible to deflect this skepticism from ourselves without incurring self-deception: when we deny reason its claim to be self-determining, we also deny it to ourselves. For after all, *we* are reason.⁷ We are reason insofar as we are prepared to justify our beliefs, actions and judgements with reasons for which we are epistemically and ethically responsible – reasons whose normative force we freely recognize, and to which we willingly assent. More importantly, however, we are reason insofar as we are able to *change* our beliefs, actions and judgements in light of valid criticism and new experiences, which ability supposes a prior openness to criticism and to new experiences. If, following Hegel, we locate reason's capacity for self-determination not in Kant's intelligible realm but in social and historical contexts of speech and action, we may see all the more clearly that reason's claim to self-determination refers to nothing less than our capacity to learn and unlearn, to correct and to transform ourselves and our practices. So the question that I wish to pose entails much more than the question of how far we are prepared to take our skepticism towards reason – which is pretty much the kind of question contemporary critics of postmodernism like to pose. The question I wish to pose cuts, I believe, a little deeper: how far are we prepared to take the skepticism towards ourselves as self-determining agents that unbounded skepticism towards reason induces? How far are we

prepared to take our skepticism towards ourselves as beings capable of self-correction and self-transformation?

Descartes more or less kick-started modern philosophy with the claim that we could not reflectively endorse any of our beliefs without methodically placing all of our beliefs into doubt. By exemplifying the cognitive *and* ethical demands that the 'quest for certainty' involves, Descartes also bequeathed one of modernity's more resilient conceptions of self-determination – a conception grounded in the subject's capacity for self-objectification and self-control. This conception of self-determination is dramatically exemplified in the *Meditations*, where Descartes' self-induced epistemological crisis becomes the occasion for confronting an experimentally unbridled skepticism, the force of which may prove fatal to his confidence in reason and his self-identity. By confronting skepticism in naked form, Descartes is re-enacting the familiar struggle between reason and unreason, between rationality and irrationality, and the just as familiar conflict between faith in a benevolent deity and the temptations of a malevolent demon. It is perhaps not surprising, then, to find that Descartes' confrontation with the irrational is strikingly reminiscent of Odysseus' confrontation with the mythic forces blocking his return home.

A look at Descartes' *Meditations* through the lens of Horkheimer's and Adorno's influential interpretation of *The Odyssey* can help bring the parallel into focus. Just as Odysseus 'loses himself to find himself', Descartes apparently abandons himself to the threat of madness and massive self-deception in order to claim his existence, to confirm it as his own.⁸ Both Odysseus and Descartes expose themselves to the 'dangerous temptations removing the self from its logical course'⁹ in order to constitute themselves as self-determining subjects. But neither Odysseus nor Descartes gives himself over to the irrational without stacking the deck in his favour. Like the cunning Odysseus, the equally cunning Descartes took certain precautionary measures to ensure that his encounter with the siren song of the senses and the sirens of radical doubt would not come to grief – to ensure that he would not lose his head when putting into question whether he is in fact identical with his thoughts, whether he is capable of distinguishing between dream and reality, between madness and sanity, between a malicious demon and a benevolent deity.¹⁰ Descartes circumvents any genuine threat to his confidence in reason and to his self-identity because the circumstances of his epistemological crisis are wholly artificial. Radical doubt is unmotivated doubt – that is, it operates without a genuine context for doubt. Restricting himself to the comfort of his own home is surely as essential to Descartes' experiment as it is symbolic of it, for what it involves is a purely theoretical not a practical test: he cannot let himself believe that he is mad or self-deceived, he can only *pretend* to be. Like

Homer's hero, Descartes is quite willing to 'fake it' when necessity dictates.¹¹

C. S. Peirce was perhaps the first to claim that Cartesian doubt was simply make-believe doubt, doubt based on a theoretical rather than a practical possibility.¹² If the philosophical history of modern reason can be said to begin with an exercise in make-believe doubt, in a highly elaborate pretense – in an act of 'faking it', if you will – it is then an ironic feature of this history that our current doubts about reason are altogether real, with altogether palpable effects upon our practices and self-understanding. These doubts cannot be easily dispelled, and certainly not by argument alone. But – to reiterate the question I posed above – how long can we sustain these doubts without fatally undermining our sense of ourselves as self-determining agents? Upon what could we base our claims to self-determination if not upon some normatively robust, self-critical, but not self-undermining, conception of reason? And if we are unable to justify some conception of ourselves as self-determining agents, how could we have justifiable confidence in ourselves and our practices – including our self-critical practices? Is not such confidence a condition of human agency and of the practice of critique?¹³

II

I would like to set aside the implications of these questions for the time being, so that I might focus my discussion more sharply on the course critique has taken once it has become skeptical of reason itself, once it has assumed the form of *unmasking* critique. From its very beginnings the practice of critique has always had an unmasking aspect, and this aspect is ineliminable. But in the moment when critique becomes detached from a conception of reason that we can reflectively endorse without relaxing our ongoing critique of reason, this previously subordinated aspect dominates, and indeed overruns, the practice of critique. And in this very same moment, critique becomes vulnerable to the same self-undermining skepticism it has generated in the beliefs and practices it takes as its objects. Eventually, as I will try to make abundantly clear, unmasking critique is consumed by the very skepticism that made its own practice possible.

While much of contemporary social and cultural criticism evinces undeniable theoretical and methodological diversity, almost all of the name-brand paradigms of critique share – to a degree that is quite remarkable – the same basic orientation. Despite genuine differences, such enterprises as deconstruction, genealogy, new historicism, certain strains of feminist theory, queer theory and postcolonial theory, as well

as various hybrids thereof, take the ultimate goal of critique to consist in the unmasking of its chosen object. In our time, critique has become so one-sidedly identified with the practice of unmasking that it is difficult to believe that it can be, or ought to be, placed in the service of a different, if not higher, goal.

That the practice of critique has become more or less identical with the activity of unmasking is certainly understandable given the degree to which our conception of critique has been shaped by the work of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Adorno, Wittgenstein, Lacan, Foucault and Derrida, among others. What we seem to admire most in their work, and what we have generally come to regard as definitive of successful unmasking critique, is the way in which they manage to redescribe x in terms of y , or reveal x to be an effect of y , or show that the condition of possibility of x necessarily requires the exclusion or repression of s , the mechanisms of which we can attribute back to ever-ready y . Ideals like truth, reason and autonomy are typical cases of x ; power, the unconscious, language, history and culture of y ; difference, the body, non-identity and the like, of s . Thanks to Nietzsche and Freud we are now more aware of the degree to which unconscious determinants seep into and shape our rational discourses and moral practices; thanks to Foucault and Adorno we are now better informed of the degree to which power can operate in the production of truth, and violence in the constitution of the self; thanks to the radicalization of these insights by feminist theorists we are – finally – more aware of the degree to which unjustifiable assumptions about gender are at work in our discourses, practices and ideals; and thanks to Heidegger and Wittgenstein we are more aware of the degree to which language opens up the world and makes possible a prior intersubjective agreement in terms of which we can distinguish between true and false and between right and wrong, and of the degree to which we depend on new uses of language to enlarge the cultural conditions of possibility.

We are unquestionably indebted to a wide range of unmasking critiques for this considerable gain in our understanding of how social, cultural, historical, linguistic and libidinal processes shape as well as constrain our ideals, practices and identities. Serious engagement with the rich insights of this tradition of critique precludes any return to naive, myopic, or undercomplex accounts of how we came to be the kind of beings that we are – beings with concerns, anxieties and problems distinctly our own. We now have a much better idea of how we got here – but *where* are we going?¹⁴ And in the name of *what*? What new or refashioned ideals, practices and identities might inspire confidence in, and renew hope for, the possibility of a future different from the past – where different would mean *better*? Now by better I certainly do not mean better according to some external, independent standard of

evaluation. Our ideals cannot but project the form of life in which they can be realized, in which they find a 'home' for themselves, and so are inseparable from some idea of the good – some idea of what it is to be a human being and some idea of what human flourishing requires. Thus, any judgements about better and worse will be indexed to internal and comparative standards of evaluation.

However, when critique is more or less identical with unmasking it lacks the resources to address the question of how we might renew our trust in ourselves and in our practices. As it is necessarily oriented to exposing false ideals, repressive practices and exclusionary identities, unmasking critique cannot help but subvert, and indeed must subvert, our confidence and hope. At its best, this form of critique challenges us to rethink and to reconstruct the basis of our confidence and hope. But when unmasking critique becomes an end in itself, serving no goals other than its own, it erodes, almost compulsively, the trust upon which its own activity depends.

At this point, the point at which critique becomes sovereign, it assumes the form of *totalizing* critique: a form of critique that places all normative standards, all social practices, equally under suspicion. When it arrives at this point, critique must face up to the problem of its own legitimacy – which is to say, it must justify its claim to sovereignty, investigating its own foundations without undermining them. Thus, it must become reflexive about the conditions of the possibility of its own activity, turning back on itself, but without turning *on* itself. How can unmasking critique give an account of its own activity without placing itself into doubt – without, that is, exposing the degree to which it must assume that its own practice is purified of, and uncontaminated by, any empirical and historical determinants; without arousing the suspicion that it has exhausted itself and is no longer capable of producing further insights?¹⁵

The problem that unmasking critique encounters when it assumes the form of a totalizing critique can be understood in two interrelated ways: as a problem of *self-reference* and as a problem of *self-reassurance*. Totalizing critique fails to come to terms with either of these problems. The first is largely an epistemological problem that involves avoiding logical inconsistency and paradox – which, in the case of totalizing critique, seems unavoidable. This can be stated as the problem of how epistemologically to immunize totalizing critique such that it cannot itself be unmasked as one more case of an *x* which can be redescribed as an effect of *y*, which effect in turn requires the exclusion or repression of *s*. The scope of this problem goes beyond epistemological hygiene: what is at issue is whether the practice of critique can be sustained under conditions of self-referential paradox. The second problem, the problem of self-reassurance, is an ethical/political one, and it involves

giving trust-creating or trust-preserving accounts of our practices and traditions – involves, that is, creating trust sufficient enough for us confidently to renew as well as to criticize them. This is not simply a matter of ‘coping’ or of ‘going on’, somewhere, somehow. It is clearly within our means to ‘go on’ by suppressing rather than solving the problems of self-reassurance. Rather, the ‘where’ to which we are going and the ‘how’ by which we hope to get there, can earn our trust only through a process we freely and collectively endorse – most obviously, but not exclusively, through public and open practices of critical reflection and deliberation. Of course we are still moving in a circle here, presupposing trust sufficient to make endorsements of our critical and reflective practices possible. But as Heidegger made clear, it makes all the difference whether the circle in question is a vicious or a virtuous one. And it makes all the difference whether our practices are hope-renewing or hope-exhausting.

So how can we trust any of our practices? And which practices seem the most likely sources of trust? If we begin from the premises of unmasking critique, trust seems impossible: we cannot even place our trust in the practice of unmasking. This situation produces – or should I say, reintroduces into our own historical circumstances – a *crisis of critique*, and the remainder of my paper is concerned first with diagnosing this crisis, and then with suggesting a way out of it.

My diagnosis can barely begin without making reference to the phenomenon of postmodernism. That postmodernism is a multi-faceted and complex intellectual and cultural formation is surely obvious by now, and it is as surely obvious that the category of postmodernism is insufficiently perspicuous to justify the use to which it is put to comprehend contemporary reality. However, there is one facet of the phenomenon of postmodernism that I wish to single out here: its self-crippling skepticism. I interpret postmodernism not as a break with modernity, but as a form of skeptical consciousness that grew from the premises of modernity – from the ontological, epistemological and socio-cultural conditions of modernity. This is not the first time this skeptical consciousness has emerged in modernity; but the apparently compulsive, almost hysterical energy with which postmodern skepticism engages in its unmasking activities, and the extent to which it thrives in both ‘high’ culture and ‘popular’ culture, must rank it as the most intense and widespread version of this skeptical consciousness that modernity has produced.

Hegel was the first adequately to characterize the nature of this skeptical consciousness. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it appears as the modern form of what he calls the ‘unhappy consciousness’. In the second half of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard redescribed Hegel’s ‘unhappy consciousness’ in terms of his notion of ‘despair’. Nietzsche used various terms to describe it: ‘the historical sense’, ‘romanticism’ and ‘nihilism’. In his texts

and lectures on Nietzsche, Heidegger reinterpreted 'nihilism' in terms he considered free of the residual subjectivism in Nietzsche's thought. But like all those before him, he regarded the skeptical consciousness to which names like 'nihilism' refer as the symptom of a crisis-inducing decline of trust. Heidegger's concern as to 'whether the West still trusts itself [*sich zutraut*]'¹⁶ has more recently been echoed – perhaps, unknowingly – by Habermas: 'What is at stake is Western culture's confidence in itself.'¹⁷

Thus, what I have described as the crisis of critique is part of a larger crisis: postmodernism is both a reaction to and a manifestation of this crisis. We can call this larger crisis a *crisis of confidence*.¹⁸ It manifests itself in our incapacity to say 'yes' to our ideals, our practices and our individual and collective identities, to make them our own by taking self-conscious responsibility for them; and it manifests itself in our incapacity to believe in the possibility of a future different from the past, in our incapacity to say 'yes' to the future. And so we can describe postmodernism as the manifestation of a 'negatively cathected' relation to ourselves and to our future.¹⁹

I have claimed that a crisis of critique is generated by the failure of unmasking critique to avoid self-referential inconsistency and by its failure to reassure itself of the legitimacy of its own enterprise. The way I have described this crisis assumes that there is a solution to this problem, and that unmasking critique has simply failed to arrive at that solution. But there is another way to look at this crisis: not as something that admits of a solution but as something to be endured – or, as the occasion making possible the very activity said to be in crisis. In the latter case, the crisis is dissolved the moment we stop taking the problem of self-reassurance so seriously, treating it as an ethical-existential relic of a world well lost. Following Hegel and Nietzsche, I call both of these responses to crisis, *irony*. The crisis of confidence and the crisis of critique which postmodern thought articulates and within which it is itself enveloped, brings about what I will henceforth designate as the *ironization of critique*.

By irony I do not mean such instances as ordinary speech in which the literal meaning of an utterance is employed in a way that produces an altogether different, often antithetical, meaning; nor do I mean the dialectical sort of irony practiced by Socrates on unwary and unreflective interlocutors. By irony I mean both a spiritual condition and a philosophical stance. Irony in this sense was paradigmatically celebrated by Friedrich von Schlegel, through which celebration he heroized the meaning-creating and meaning-destroying power of the 'romantic' artist – who, if we are to believe Hegel, was the first fashionable rebel without a cause. Recognizing that the conception and practice of irony that Schlegel celebrated involved much more than a claim to represent the

latest thing in art and culture, Hegel responded to his contemporary with the first critique of irony – a critique I am seeking to renew in a manner appropriate to our own time.²⁰

Hegel considered irony to be the symptom of a normative breakdown in human relationships, a breakdown in the intersubjective structures of collective forms of life. He characterized irony as the inability to identify with one's social world, and to identify oneself as an accountable *participant* in the making and remaking of one's world. In this respect, irony means never having to say 'I' or 'We' without interminable equivocation. And it also means never having to be constrained by demands emanating from outside the self. Because the ironist is captive to a conception of freedom that renders freedom incompatible with constraints of any kind, he takes 'flight from every content as from a restriction'.²¹ The ironist, therefore, assumes the stance of a detached observer who freely consumes, or freely plays with, the cultural resources of his world. As a philosophical outlook, irony is committed to what Charles Taylor calls an 'ontology of disengagement'.²² This ontology is distinguished, on the one hand, by an extreme subjectivism that regards the subject as the protean centre of meaning and value, and, on the other, by an atomistic conception of society that denies the existence of non-arbitrary bonds and obligations. Apprehending anything and everything as *ein wesenloses Geschöpf*, an 'inessential product' of his own activity, the ironist-subject 'knows himself to be disengaged and free from everything, not bound to anything, because he is just as able to destroy as to create the bonds that bind him'.²³

As exemplary contemporary representatives of philosophical ironism I want briefly to focus upon two thinkers between whom one would expect to find little in common, Paul de Man and Richard Rorty. Although Rorty and de Man are ironists in Hegel's specified sense, Rorty, unlike de Man, does not give irony the final word. Nonetheless, he grants it much more than he should. To begin, here is de Man's description of the ironist stance – a description he offers in the context of a discussion of Friedrich von Schlegel.

Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse into the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world.²⁴

On de Man's view, then, all that ironized critique is capable of is the reiteration of the insight into the 'nothingness of human matters'.²⁵ Thus, unmasking critique is fated to repeat its Sisyphean task 'without end and without progress', for its insights can have no practical effect

on the 'empirical world'.²⁶ All we can learn is that we cannot learn: failure to learn any more than this is ontologically inscribed in the very 'nature of things'.²⁷ Critique, like literature, is an endlessly repeated 'allegory of errors',²⁸ permitting us to name and endure the void that we are. De Man's response to the crisis of critique converges with negative theology, passing off the blindness of despair for insight. But it is nonetheless instructive, because this most extreme example of the ironization of critique makes abundantly clear the consequences critique must face when unmasking is practiced without hope.

Rorty's brand of irony is much earthier, informed not by negative theology but by a baldly naturalistic and radically nominalistic interpretation of Nietzsche and of the heritage of American pragmatism. For Rorty, the ironist is not someone who is fated to suffer the law of repetition; rather, the ironist is someone who realizes 'that *anything* can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed'.²⁹ In virtue of this upbeat insight, the ironist renounces 'any attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies' (by which Rorty means those languages of interpretation and evaluation upon which we cannot but rely in order to make sense of ourselves and the world).³⁰ By claiming that 'anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed', Rorty is expressing the very feature of Schlegelian irony that Hegel tried to make look as bad as possible: the idea that the object of critique imposes no constraints upon the critic – that is, that the redescribing subject is unconstrained by its redescribable objects. The ironist is free to do with the object of his critique what he wills: the object stands at his disposal, makes itself available to his unmasking purposes. Resistance is useless: the object either betrays itself under the interrogatory gaze of the unmasking critic, or makes itself available as soft, pliable material, ever-ready to conform to whatever redescriptive purposes that may be imposed upon it. Above all, ironists want whatever they encounter in the world to confirm their conception of unconstrained freedom, their conception of themselves as unconstrained creators. They are, in Nietzsche's words, 'always out to shape and interpret their environment as *free* nature: wild, arbitrary, fantastic, disorderly, and surprising'.³¹

Obviously if critique is as unconstrained by its objects as the ironist claims, there really is no point in formulating 'criteria of choice' between one redescription and another. The very idea that there may be better or worse vocabularies within which to carry out the activity of criticism is an idea that can hardly seem to be of any use once one has fully accepted the ironist's premises. But is hard to see how we might come to trust any of our vocabularies if we cannot distinguish better from worse. And it is just as hard to see how the view of cultural and historical change that ironist theory provides can generate confidence in ourselves as agents of change. When anything can be made to look good or bad by being

redescribed, the possibility of confidently saying 'yes' to possibly different practices and to a possibly different future seems to be severely limited if not entirely revoked. Any 'yes-saying' – and here, as before, I do mean Nietzsche's '*Ja-Sagen*' – any collective endorsement of and commitment to better practices and to a better future, would be lucky to last as long as Warhol's 15 minutes. Nietzsche's '*Ja-Sagen*' supposes that we have the ability to make and to keep our promises, and that we have gotten over the immature belief that our allegiance to long-term projects of individual and social change is incompatible with our freedom – in short, that we are no longer captive to the seductive ideal of unconstrained freedom.

But Rorty does not want to question the ideal of freedom that nourishes the ironist outlook. Instead, he wants to check the threat of irony by an altogether different approach. Rorty calls the ironist insight into how anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, the 'recognition of contingency'. Knowing the crisis of confidence it creates, he tries to make the recognition of contingency compatible with an affirmation of our beliefs and practices in terms of an ideal of solidarity.³² By historicizing our beliefs and practices, by showing that any one of them can be creatively redescribed in upgrading or downgrading terms, Rorty claims that the recognition of contingency can have an emancipatory effect: we become – as Schlegel already claimed – conscious of our own capacity to create and destroy meaning. But this hardly answers the crisis of confidence. There is still a huge gap between recognizing our contingency, on the one hand, and reflectively endorsing and self-critically appropriating our all too contingent beliefs and practices, on the other. This gap cannot be closed at all if we suppose that our beliefs and practices can be made to look good or bad any which way. Otherwise, the formation of our ideals, beliefs, practices and identities would be indistinguishable from a nominalist power game – from a rhetorical 'war of all against all' in which successful redescription would be indistinguishable from successful imposition. Rorty is not unaware of this disturbing conundrum. Yet, he still believes it possible to get to solidarity from irony, and to hold onto irony without subverting solidarity. His suggestion that we ought to substitute for the metaphysical desire for objectivity the ethical 'desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of "us" as far as we can', is surely worthy of our consideration.³³ But the reference of this 'us' is just as surely deprived of *its* objectivity, *its* normative status, if it can be redescribed any which way – if the bonds that bind us to one another can be just as arbitrarily destroyed as they can be arbitrarily created.

Rorty's own critique of irony involves reconstructing the history of ironist theory as the history of a misapplied insight. Those theorists

whom Rorty identifies as ironists – Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault – simply failed to privatize their need to describe themselves in their own terms, in words which are not part of anybody's language-game or of any social institution. They thought that their private need for self-creation required a public, political counterpart. But once we come to appreciate that irony is an 'inherently private matter',³⁴ once we privatize irony, it will no longer pose a threat to our public attempts to fashion a non-ironic basis for our solidarity-creating practices, and ironists will no longer be handicapped by their inability to 'say "we" long enough to identify with the culture of the generation to which they belong'.³⁵

This seems like a neat solution, and its appeal is obvious. However, it is marred by two serious mistakes. First, Rorty misdiagnoses the nature of irony: it is not an 'inherently' private matter, and not largely the preoccupation of artists and intellectuals. It never has been. This should come as no surprise. Our doubts about ourselves and about the future are hardly restricted to intellectuals and artists. The sources of irony as a spiritual condition and philosophical stance lie in the background understanding of our culture, an understanding that ironist theory articulates and at the same time reproduces, but does not by itself create. Because he underestimates the scope of irony, Rorty also underestimates the crisis of confidence within which irony is enmeshed. He claims that he 'cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization'.³⁶ But I don't think any imagination is required to see that that is just what our culture is doing, socializing our youth under conditions that make irony the most agreeable and least 'inauthentic' response to the crisis of confidence.³⁷

Second, Rorty's solution supposes that 'one can cut the links which bind one's vocabulary to the vocabularies used by one's fellow humans' without 'cutting the bonds which, for purposes of action, unite one with one's fellow citizens'.³⁸ We would be entitled to this supposition only if we could show that the links between the vocabularies which frame our individual identities are quite independent of the bonds upon which our collective identities depend; and that one could know – without begging the question of how one could occupy the neutral position necessary for such knowledge – where the links between vocabularies come to an end, and where the bonds between human beings begin. For good Hegelian reasons, I don't think anyone can show that. To do so would require showing that the borders between our private and public identities were impermeable rather than porous; and it would require showing that we could make sense of our vocabularies of self-description *independently* of making sense of the bonds that bind us to one another.

As a case in point, admittedly a rather dramatic case, to test the

ironist claim that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, let us consider an hypothetical attempt to make the 'final solution' look good. Now unless we belong to a small circle of white supremacists incapable of self-reflection or self-criticism, we will find *our* attempt to make the near-extermination of European Jewry look good rather unconvincing, and rather artificial, to say the least. This would not be because we are semantically uncreative, but because there are beliefs which we cannot make look 'good' without *pretending* to surrender our deepest convictions about what human dignity is, without pretending to violate our deepest commitments to the value of a life free from fear. Such convictions and commitments do not change overnight, and certainly not at the push of a button called radical redescription, or of one called radical doubt. The links between our vocabularies of self-description really do interlock with the bonds that bind us to one another.

On the other hand, I think Rorty is right to insist that there is something emancipatory about the recognition of contingency. It does allow us to see that things have not always been this way, and that they will not remain as they are; from which follows, the way things now are, is not the way things have to be. And in this respect, the recognition of contingency opens up our horizon of possibility. I also think Rorty is right to insist that 'the language we presently speak' is not 'all the language we shall ever need'.³⁹ With the recognition of contingency comes the recognition that if moral and political progress is to be possible, we shall '*always* need new metaphors, new logical spaces, new jargons'.⁴⁰ What I do not hear with equal insistence, however, is that new metaphors, new logical spaces and new jargons are the outcome of critical *insight* that allows us to see the difference between 'old' and 'new' practices as the difference between better and worse practices. Of course, critical insights can be historically surpassed, but the only thing that needs to follow from this historicist point, is a gain in understanding, not a retreat into irony.

Exhausted, consumed by its own skepticism, unmasking critique is truly a 'form of life that has grown old'. By taking refuge in irony, critique has surrendered the possibility of a form of social and cultural transformation that cannot be made to look good or bad simply in virtue of how it is described. The unavailability of fixed, ahistorical criteria of judgement does not entail that we cannot confidently – although not infallibly – judge some beliefs and practices to be genuinely better than others. Recognizing that our beliefs and practices are contingent, not dictated or confirmed by some non-human power or by some way the world 'really is' independent of our contribution, however, is not the same as thinking of them as on all fours with long-playing records, typewriters and card-catalogues. We do not want to keep repeating another of Descartes' mistakes, the essentially modernist mistake, thinking

ourselves capable of dismantling all our previous beliefs and practices, of breaking with the past and with all that binds us to other human beings, and beginning anew *from scratch*.

When we look closely at the ironist's conception of meaning-creating and meaning-destroying power, when we look at it with an historically informed eye, we find that the ironist and his conception remain ensnared in Cartesian skepticism and Cartesian methodological solipsism. Like Descartes, the ironist believes that you cannot have confidence without certainty. *Pace* Descartes and postmodern skepticism, however, we can have confidence without certainty, a kind of confidence that is compatible with the recognition of contingency. This kind of confidence grows from a critical, reflective and open relation to our ideals and our practices; it does not require foundationalist support. Furthermore, radical redescription falters on the same set of assumptions as radical doubt. When put to the test, it too turns out to be *make-believe*; it too involves engaging in the same theoretical pretense that one can engage in only from the standpoint of a disengaged observer. Irony can only be lived as *make-believe*; and it can be faked for only so long before one succumbs either to self-deception or to despair.

III

Once critique is completely ironized, it can no longer be evaluated according to its practical – i.e. its ethical-political – effects; rather, it can only be evaluated by the standards of successful *performance* (redescription, deconstruction, etc.). Because it is no longer producing new insights, but merely repeating the same insights, the goal of critique shifts inexorably to the achievement of *tour de force* performances of unmasking. Although it remains parasitical upon its 'defenceless' object, ironized critique must deny its object any independence, compulsively repeating its apparently spectacular conquests of an object it can encounter only as *ein wesenloses Geschöpf*. Critique becomes sovereign, and the critic, in place of the artist, the new romantic hero. Such performances can and do generate considerable applause, but not confidence and hope. But what is needed now is the renewal of our hope and confidence, not the endless repetition of unmasking performances – however dazzling and crowd-pleasing. Contrary to the self-understanding of ironist theorists, the subversive force of this brand of unmasking has been spent. Indeed, the self-crippling skepticism in which ironist theory culminates, is no longer in opposition to, but in conformity with, its culture. For this skepticism is of a kind that dovetails quite neatly with the widespread relativism and subjectivism that pervades the culture it supposedly opposes.

Ultimately my purpose here consists less in further examination of the debilitating shortcomings of ironist critique than in proposing an alternative. The alternative I shall propose does not involve a theoretical or methodological reorientation, but rather, an *ethical* reorientation. This reorientation follows from a clarification of our ethical relation to the practice of critique, making explicit the responsibilities and obligations we take on when we engage in its practice. Through this ethical reorientation critique recovers its *practical* intent, the purpose of which was and is 'to initiate processes of self-reflection'⁴¹ that help to 'liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them'.⁴² Through such a change in self-understanding, the orientation of critique shifts from ironist theory to transformative practice, from the role of ironic observer to that of critical participant in a culturally pluralistic, but commonly shared, social world.

I draw the normative resources for this ethical reorientation largely from the very same tradition out of which unmasking critique fashioned itself – from Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault, among others. I am convinced that unmasking critique is based on a misunderstanding of its own tradition, amounting to a kind of self-misunderstanding. On my understanding of this tradition, the unmasking aspect of critique was never meant to be an end in itself, and never meant to end in irony: but it was meant to be subordinated to utopian projects of individual *and* collective transformation.⁴³ In effect, I am attempting to release this philosophical tradition from the interpretive grip of post-modernism and ironism with which it has come to be so closely identified – indeed, so-called 'continental' philosophy has become more or less synonymous with postmodernism (or postmodern skepticism). But at the same time, I reject the assumption shared by postmodernists and critical theorists alike, that post-Kantian European philosophy is split along the purported 'battle lines between Nietzsche and Hegel'.⁴⁴ Thus, clarifying the ethical-practical basis of critique also involves an ongoing reinterpretation of the European philosophical tradition. For the sake of convenience, I give my alternative to ironist critique the name *transformative critique*, through which I would like to identify and clarify the normative demands of the practice of critique. Like transcendental conditions, these normative demands *enable* the very activity they constrain. Think of these demands as ethical-practical presuppositions of the practice of critique: (1) publicity; (2) the participant's perspective; (3) responsiveness; (4) world disclosure; (5) reconstruction; (6) affirmation of the future; and (7) self-transformation. I will discuss each of these in turn.

(1) The practice of critique needs to be reconnected to free and open examination, to public forms of justification. It should not be assimilated to performance art. The demand for public justification forces critique out of the avant-garde mentality that for so long has afflicted

unmasking/ironist critique. If critique is to be oriented toward the transformation of our practices and self-understanding, its insights have to be freely and reflectively endorsed by an ethical-political 'we' whose horizon of inclusion cannot be delimited. In this way, the fragile interdependence of freedom, reason and critique can be re-established. The fragile interdependence among the practices of reason, freedom and critique may be all the 'foundation' modernity requires; but if we are to trust this 'foundation' we will need to broaden our conception of these practices, making them less narrow, less self-undermining.

This will require a normative expansion of the meaning of freedom, reason and critique in accordance with, not in denial of, the insights of the critique of reason after Kant. But it will also require an expansion of the range of what can be publicly justified: both an expansion of the 'logical space of reasons' and an expansion of the public spheres of reason. We are much more aware than Kant was of the diversity of voices in which reason speaks, and of the social, political, cultural and economic asymmetries that allow some voices to drown out others. The interdependence of freedom, reason and critique can be securely established only in 'official' and 'unofficial' public spheres in which the expansion of 'the logical space of reasons' is continuous with the inclusion and recognition of previously unheard or marginalized voices: both the diverse 'voices' in which reason speaks and the plural voices of speaking persons.

(2) As Kant first claimed, and as has been reiterated by Habermas and Foucault, critique needs to be understood in relation to a historical process of enlightenment for which *all* are responsible, in which *all* participate. Even in its most uncompromising form, unmasking critique is connected, if only in the most tenuous and ambivalent way, to the possibility of enlightenment. So long as we engage in it, we are the heirs of the Enlightenment (albeit, deeply uncertain and perplexed heirs). To engage in critique is perhaps the most important and most direct expression of our responsibility for this process – a process Kant described negatively as the 'way out' (*Ausgang*) of our self-imposed state of 'immaturity' (*Unmündigkeit*). In his own reflection on the question entitling Kant's famous essay, 'What is Enlightenment', Foucault glosses Kant as claiming that we are agents of Enlightenment to the extent that we participate in it, and Enlightenment occurs only to the extent that we freely accept it as a task and as an obligation.⁴⁵ Accepting the task of finding our 'way out' of our self-imposed state of immaturity demands, as Hegel argued, a *positive* (not uncritical!) identification with our social world, through which we come to see ourselves as accountable *participants* in the making and remaking of the world: *Here is the rose, dance here*.⁴⁶ To engage in critique is to join in the dance, here in this crisis-entangled present, in this dirempted modernity.

(3) Critique needs to be enacted in relation to something in the present distinct from the past, which something points at the same time to the possibility of a future different from the past. Critique thus involves a relation to the present (and thereby to the future) which demands both *aesthetic* responsiveness and *ethical* responsibility. By aesthetic responsiveness I mean an engagement with the present involving the play of distance and nearness – involving both the capacity to reflect on (distance) and the capacity to undergo (nearness) the meaning of the present. Without affective as well as reflective access to the *presentness* of the present, the practice of transformative critique could not get going at all. The significance transformative critique ascribes to the present is ‘indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is’.⁴⁷

As I have indicated, the relation critique takes up to the present demands not only aesthetic responsiveness, but also ethical responsibility. In a late interview, Foucault described the practice of philosophical critique in relation to the present, and the relation of the critic to her audience, in a manner strikingly reminiscent of Hegel’s conception of the purpose of philosophy and of the ‘need’ which awakens it.⁴⁸ Foucault makes clear that the capacity to see oneself as responsible for one’s time is co-extensive with the capacity to be responsive to that which one’s time demands. Furthermore, he makes clear that the critical relation to the present situates the activity of critique not just within the present, but also within an ‘us’ which makes this present its own concern:

It is this ‘us’ that is becoming for the philosopher the object of his own reflection. By the same token, the philosopher can no longer avoid the question of the specific way in which he belongs to this ‘us.’ All this – philosophy as the problematization of the present, and as the questioning by the philosopher of this present to which he belongs and in relation to which he has to situate himself – might well be said to characterize philosophy as the discourse of modernity on modernity.⁴⁹

(4) Critique needs to be related to the present in another way: through the consciousness of crisis, which consciousness is more than the consciousness of a breakdown in our practices and self-understanding.⁵⁰ Crisis is a form of experience that can also disclose new kinds of awareness and new possibilities. A crisis is both a challenge to the problem-solving power of our current interpretive and evaluative languages, and an opportunity to surpass their limitations. Transformative critique depends on creative solutions to the problems in which crises entangle us. Drawing upon a Heideggerian term of art, I refer to the activity which produces such creative solutions as the *world-disclosing* aspect of critique. In this context, world disclosure refers to the activity

by which new interpretations and new uses of language enlarge the realm of meaning and the cultural conditions of possibility. As John Dewey wrote in the closing pages of *Art and Experience*, the ‘disclosure . . . of possibilities that contrast with actual conditions’ is ‘the most penetrating “criticism” of the latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening up before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress.’⁵¹

Critique cannot be transformative if it is not world-disclosing, for any genuine solution to a crisis will introduce a change in our interpretive and evaluative languages – a change that can be retrospectively explained and justified as an error-reducing *gain* in understanding. Thus any critique of the present will be *future-directed* and *future-dependent*. This is precisely how Hegel understood dialectical critique. The power of Hegel’s dialectical critique of ancient (aristocratic) and modern (negative) conceptions of freedom, in the *Phenomenology*’s justifiably famous chapter on recognition, rests on Hegel’s rich descriptions of how the self-understandings and practices that grow from these conceptions break down, and get entangled in self-induced crises. But it rests all the more on the persuasiveness of the possible form of freedom which his dialectical argument projects onto the future – a form of freedom whose ‘truth’ can be fully confirmed only in a future different from the past. By enlarging the cultural conditions of possibility, transformative critique also seeks to create the ‘appropriate social conditions under which agents themselves may verify or falsify’ its insights.⁵²

(5) Critique needs to subordinate unmasking to transformation, and it can do so by taking up a constraint on critique suggested by Nietzsche, but forgotten by his overly enthusiastic epigone: ‘*We can destroy only as creators.*’⁵³ We can deconstruct our ideals, practices and identities *only* to the extent that we can *reconstruct* them, unmask them *only* to the extent that we can *transform* them. This is a very demanding and powerful constraint, for not only does it have the effect of severely down-sizing the unmasking industry, it makes the practice of critique both a more arduous and a more accountable activity. Once one gets the hang of it, the activity of unmasking and deconstructing is relatively easy and painless. After a while, the outcome of this activity – as de Man came early to realize – is quite predictable. On the other hand, creating better alternatives to our current ideals, practices and identities is neither easy nor painless: it unavoidably involves cognitive, ethical and political struggle, the success of which can hardly be guaranteed in advance.

The normative demand that we can ‘destroy only as creators’ arises from Nietzsche’s justified suspicion of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, a suspicion which issues not in irony but in insight. It can be glossed as follows: we must be as critically vigilant of the spirit that moves us to profane our ideals as we are of the spirit that impels us to divinize our

ideals – as critically vigilant of our deflationary as of our inflationary impulses. Critique that focuses its activity exclusively on the practice of unmasking has become unbalanced, out of tune:

And as for our future, one will hardly find us again on the paths of those Egyptian youths who endanger temples by night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons. No, this bad taste, this will to truth, to 'truth at any price', this youthful madness in the love of truth, have lost their charm for us. . . . We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this. Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, or to be present at everything, or to understand and 'know' everything.⁵⁴

(6) Additionally, to 'destroy as creators' means affirming, saying 'yes' to the future. We must not only affirm the future as a horizon of possibility, we must also generate horizon-enlarging possibilities. But any such affirmation of the future must avoid the worst error of modernism: affirming a *determinate* future. A future imagined with complete determinacy would involve denying the indeterminacy, the openness, essential to the future, and so would be a negation of the future. We could confidently affirm the future as a horizon of possibility only if our orientation to the future made us insightfully aware of the needs of the present and of a previously uncritical relation to the past. Such an orientation to the future compels us to take up the ethical perspective of an historically accountable 'future present'. From this projected ethical perspective we come to recognize the past as the *prehistory* of the present, to which the present is connected 'as if by a chain of continual destiny'.⁵⁵ Nietzsche calls the capacity to take up this ethical perspective and the obligations it enjoins *Menschlichkeit* – 'humaneness'. And he attributes to this not yet fully formed capacity an extraordinary transformative power:

Anyone who manages to experience the history of humanity as a whole as *his own history* will feel in an enormously generalized way all the grief of an invalid who thinks of health, of an old man who thinks of the dreams of his youth, of a lover deprived of his beloved, of the martyr whose ideal is perishing, of the hero on the evening after a battle that has decided nothing but brought him wounds and the loss of his friend. But if one endured, if one *could* endure this immense sum of grief of all kinds while yet being the hero who, as the second day of battle breaks, welcomes the dawn and his fortune, being a person whose horizon encompasses thousands of years past and future, being the heir of all the nobility of all past spirit – an heir with a sense of obligation . . . if one could burden one's soul with this . . . [and] if one could finally contain all this in one soul and crowd it into a single feeling – this would surely have to result in a happiness that humanity has not known so far: the happiness of a god full of power and love, full of tears and laughter, a happiness that, like the sun in the evening,

continually bestows its inexhaustible riches, pouring them into the sea, feeling richest, as the sun does, only when even the poorest fisherman is still rowing with golden oars! This godlike feeling would then be called – humaneness.⁵⁶

(7) Drawing once again on Nietzsche and Foucault, the final normative demand stipulates that the practice of critique ought to transform not only the object of critique, but also the critical subject. Critique entails the mutual transformation of both subject and object – entails changing oneself as well as the world. By engaging in critique we are engaging in self-critique, and successful critique cannot leave our self-understanding and our identities unchanged. And that means, *pace* ironist theory, that we can master neither the practice nor the objects of critique: we will always be in the position of those who have something to learn – in the position of those who are themselves in need of self-correction and self-transformation. And where self-correction and self-transformation are at stake, we are not engaged in a learning that is painless and without a sense of loss.

Nietzsche regarded the practice of philosophical critique as an ‘art of transfiguration’:⁵⁷ to engage in it is to engage in changing oneself. In one of his last interviews, Foucault gives us an indication of the relation to oneself that such an art involves:

I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. . . . This transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?⁵⁸

And I would add: Why should a critic engage in critique if she is not transformed by the object upon which she labours? Indeed, is it even possible for one seriously to engage in critique without bringing about a change in one’s life, a change in who and what one is? It would be possible only if one regarded the object upon which one laboured as an ‘inessential product’ of one’s own activity. But even when we refuse to be affected by the object upon which we labour, our relation to the activity of critique is self-defining, if not self-transforming. Thus, Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s remarks provide an occasion for reflecting on the practical relation to oneself that one’s critical activity necessarily involves.

Although the alternative I have proposed requires much more elaboration and grounding than I have provided here, it should nonetheless have made clear the obligations and responsibilities with which critique is faced – obligations and responsibilities that engage it in a world-transforming and self-transforming practice. Identifying with, and taking responsibility for, that which is to be transformed – both ourselves and the world – are necessary conditions of a critical practice that

is free of the self-consuming skepticism of ironist critique. Through these seven normative demands, a practice of transformative critique can be constituted in a way that avoids the epistemological problem of self-reference while responding responsibly to the ethical-political problem of self-reassurance.

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Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996), p. 8.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 8 ff.
- 3 For an elaboration of this point, see Susan Neiman's illuminating study, *The Unity of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- 4 *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 8.
- 5 In a recent paper, Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa argue that the idea of incommensurable realities or worlds can be defended without the self-refuting claims that any defence of *strong* incommensurability involves. The idea of weakly incommensurable worlds does not involve claims about mutual unintelligibility or mutual unrecognizability when two such worlds confront one another, it involves only the claim that these worlds or realities are not assimilable to one all-embracing reality. See 'Two Kinds of Anti-Essentialism and their Consequences', *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Summer 1996): 735–63.
- 6 For Foucault's remarks see the interview 'Critical Theory/Intellectual History', in *Michel Foucault. Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 26–37, and the interview 'Space, Knowledge, Power', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 248–50; for Marx's see the letter to Arnold Ruge from the *Deutsch-Französische-Jarbücher*, in Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 208.
- 7 Of course, reason is not *all* we are! What I am trying to counteract with this claim is the assumption that reason is something external to us, an instrument we can wield as suits our purposes.
- 8 See Stanley Cavell, 'Betting Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)', in his *In Praise of the Ordinary* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 105–29.
- 9 Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 47.
- 10 'I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by *pretending* for a time that [my] former opinions are utterly false and imaginary . . . I know that no danger or error will result from my plan, and that I cannot possibly go too far in my

- distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge.' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 15; my emphasis.
- 11 For an elaboration of this point, as well as for criticism of the Cartesian model of epistemological crisis, see Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science', *The Monist* 60 (1977): 453–71.
 - 12 See 'Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man' and 'Some Consequences of Four Incapacities', in Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 66–118.
 - 13 In the third of his *Meditations*, Descartes acknowledges that his faith in reason and in his capacity for self-determination is not based *in* reason so much as it is in his *faith* in a benevolent deity. From Kant and Hegel to Habermas, there have been a series of attempts to justify a faith, a confidence – a trust – in reason that makes no appeal to something outside reason. And the problem with these attempts, and the controversy that surrounds them, has to do with the contested meaning of that in which we are asked to place our trust. My point here is that there is a circular relation between trust and reason, between trust and our capacity for self-determination, however we may formulate our conceptions of reason and agency. For yet another approach to this question of the problematic relation between reason and confidence, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 170–1.
 - 14 It is *de rigueur* among the unmasking-inclined to ask just who such a 'we' is supposed to represent. I would like to disarm (but may fortify) the concerns that prompt this question by answering it in the following way: the 'we' refers in this case to anyone and everyone for whom understanding how they came to have the ideals, practices and identities that they do, and how they might be criticized and changed for the better, is an *ineliminable* part of their conception of what makes life worth living. Thus, this we is constituted by a bond that is *ethical*, not metaphysical.
 - 15 In the foregoing I have recapitulated part of Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the aporias of unmasking critique in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 114–30. However, I do not regard his way out of these aporias as the only viable alternative; nor do I accept the interpretation of post-Kantian European philosophy that supports the alternative he proposes. For elaboration of my differences with Habermas's conception of reason and critique, and of his interpretation of post-Kantian European philosophy, see the following works by me: 'Heidegger's Challenge and the Future of Critical Theory', in Peter Dews (ed.) *Habermas: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999); *In Times of Need: Habermas, Heidegger and the Future of Critical Theory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming); and *Crisis and Transformation: The Aesthetic Critique of Modernity from Hegel to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
 - 16 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Vol. I (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961), p. 579. This passage is mistranslated in the English translation of Heidegger's Nietzsche

- lectures, ed. David Farrel Krell, *Nietzsche*, Vols 3 and 4 (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 91. The passage that I have cited is translated as 'whether the West still dare', willfully mistranslating the verb *sich zutrauen* which means to trust oneself, to have confidence in oneself.
- 17 Habermas, 'The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies', in *The New Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 51.
 - 18 For another, complementary perspective on this crisis see Allison Weir, 'Glauben an Wissen: Das Problem der Überzeugung in der Feministischen Theorie', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 1 (1997): 51–61.
 - 19 *ibid.*, p. 50.
 - 20 Although he would have been surprised to find he shared much of anything with Hegel, Nietzsche offered a complementary critique of irony in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*.
 - 21 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H. B. Nesbit (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 38 (translation slightly altered).
 - 22 See 'Lichtung and Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein', in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 61–79.
 - 23 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I*, Vol. 13 of his *Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 95.
 - 24 Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 222; my emphasis.
 - 25 De Man, 'The Crisis of Criticism', in *Blindness and Insight*, p. 18.
 - 26 *ibid.*, p. 11.
 - 27 *ibid.*, p. 18.
 - 28 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 118.
 - 29 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 73.
 - 30 *ibid.*, p. 73.
 - 31 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 233.
 - 32 Rorty simply cannot wring an endorsement of our practices from the premises of ironism. So the ideal of solidarity is introduced with a different set of premises, premises that are incompatible with the premises of irony.
 - 33 Richard Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity?', in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23.
 - 34 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 87.
 - 35 Rorty, 'Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 174.
 - 36 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 87.
 - 37 The enormous popularity of films like *Clerks* and *Pulp Fiction* is just one small indication of the degree to which irony has become not only a very attractive but also the only viable stance for contemporary youth.
 - 38 Rorty, 'Moral Identity and Private Autonomy', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 194.

- 39 Rorty, 'Philosophy as Science, Metaphor, Politics', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 12. For fuller consideration and criticism of this side of Rorty's thought, see my 'So We Need Something Else for Reason to Mean', in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 8(3) (2000).
- 40 *ibid.*, p. 19.
- 41 Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 38.
- 42 Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in *Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), p. 244.
- 43 I provide the support for this interpretation in the forthcoming books referred to in note 15.
- 44 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 310.
- 45 Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment', in Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 35.
- 46 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 22.
- 47 Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment', p. 41.
- 48 *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie in Jenaer Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 22; for an English translation see *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), p. 89.
- 49 Michel Foucault, 'The Art of Telling the Truth', in *Michel Foucault. Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 88.
- 50 For an extremely valuable study of the relation between critique and crisis, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).
- 51 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 38.
- 52 James Bohman, 'Habermas, Marxism, and Social Theory: the Case for Pluralism in Critical Social Science', in Peter Dews (ed.) *Habermas: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999), p. 80.
- 53 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 122.
- 54 *ibid.*, p. 35.
- 55 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 14.
- 56 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, pp. 268–9.
- 57 *ibid.*, p. 35.
- 58 Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 14.