Contents

PREFACE: THE THEORIST AS CRITIC ix

I: Liberalism and Hyper-Liberalism 1

1 Liberalism in the Cross-Hairs of Theory 3
2 The Proper Bounds of Self 18
3 Reconciling Liberty and Equality 21
4 Cruelty First 25
5 Liberalism as Neutralism 28
6 Revising the Self 35
7 Liberalism, Pluralism, and Religion 44
8 Richard Rorty’s Liberalism 51
9 Foucault’s Hyper-Liberalism 64

II: Interrogating Modernity 81

10 Do We Need a Philosophical Ethics? Theory, Prudence, and the Primacy of Ethos 83
11 Rescuing the Rationalist Heritage 95
12 Accepting Finitude 102
13 Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: The Uncommenced Dialogue 105
   Appendix: Response from a Colleague, with a Rejoinder 118
14 Eros and the Bourgeoisie 134
15 Left-Wing Conservatism: The Legacy of Christopher Lasch 139
16 Hermeneutical Generosity and Social Criticism 151
17 Thin Ice 167
III: Political Judgment Revisited  173

18 Practical Wisdom  175
19 Science and Wisdom  178
20 Rereading Hannah Arendt’s Kant Lectures  184

NOTES  195

INDEX  229
But philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying.

Hegel

Let me first hasten to make clear that the cross-hairs I refer to in the lead essay of this collection are not those of a gunsight, as if my purpose were to wage war on liberalism. What I actually have in mind are the instruments of optical inquiry: the ocular of a telescope or microscope. Hence the aim is an enhancement of vision.

I suspect that this is not the only misapprehension to which readers of these essays will find themselves subject. Indeed, running through these essays – and perhaps through my entire work – is a conception of theory that many readers will likely find paradoxical. For this reason, it would probably be sensible of me to begin this preface with a brief discussion of the problem of theory in general, if only to show that I am aware that many will find my core conception of theory paradoxical. If there is one idea that is at the heart of all my efforts as a theorist of social life, it is the notion that radically different existential demands are made by civic life on the one hand and by the life of theory on the other. This is a theme that runs from the opening chapter to the closing chapter of this book; in Chapter 19 I refer to it as the ‘dualism’ of theory and practice. The purpose of the theorist, at least as I see it, is not to offer sensible guidance on the conduct of social life, but rather to probe the normative adequacy of a given vision of social order by pushing that particular vision as far as it will go: hence the ‘intellectual extremism’ that is, as it were, built into the whole enterprise of theory (as enacted by its most ambitious
practitioners). The exemplary theorists are what J.S. Mill referred to (and celebrated) as 'one-eyed men' whose 'one eye is a penetrating one' precisely because it does not see the whole truth: 'if they saw more, they probably would not see so keenly, nor so eagerly pursue one course of inquiry.' The practice of citizenship should be sober, sensible, prudential, moderate, and (in the best sense of the word) 'liberal,' whereas theory should be radical, extravagant, probing, biting, and immoderate. That is why one should never presume that exemplars of the adventure of theory will also be exemplars of civic praxis (Plato was hardly the last philosopher to go astray in Syracuse).

As one example of the competing imperatives of theory and citizenship, consider the political problem of nationalism. As a matter of prudential citizenship, it may make perfectly good sense to try to strike a reasonable compromise between liberalism and nationalism. Yet it is in the interests of good theory to drive them apart, in order to clarify the pure demands that each makes upon the human being qua human being: the liberal's demand for universal dignity versus the nationalist's demand for communal belonging. This is not to deny that having submitted liberalism and nationalism to the exercise of radical theoretical scrutiny, one may be left with insights into the essence of each that can be profitably applied to the world of practice. My point, rather, is that the vocation of theory must be animated by imperatives of its own that are distinct from our need, as citizens, for salubrious maxims of political practice. In civic life it is often desirable to fudge sharp differences and to seek pragmatic compromises: to try, if possible, to have our cake and eat it too. In the life of theory, on the other hand, splitting the difference between opposing theoretical alternatives is always intolerable and violates the very meaning of the enterprise: to think through in a fully coherent way what it means to interpret the ultimate nature of social life according to one set of philosophical categories rather than another.

This issue of the utter radicalism of the theoretical enterprise comes out as well in Chapter 16, where I contrast Charles Taylor's 'rhetoric of understanding' with my own 'rhetoric of criticism.' The simple fact is that there would have been no grand tradition of political philosophy at all if, say, Plato's aim had been to 'understand' the Greek polis, or if Rousseau had sought to 'understand' the world of the Parisian salon, or if Marx had sought to 'understand' the bourgeoisie, or if Nietzsche's enterprise had been to 'understand' the culture of nineteenth-century Europe. Our experience of the present is enlivened and enlarged by these grand philosophies precisely because their aim, in each case, was a project of root-
and-branch criticism. Contrary to the contemporary injunction to eschew foundations, each of the great theorists just mentioned made such an exemplary contribution to the enterprise of theory precisely \textit{because} each was determined to search for an ultimate ground. In the case of Plato the idea of a rational ordering of the soul provides an ultimate normative standard for the judging of politics. In Rousseau's case, the ultimate normative standard is the idea of self-legislation - of the free determination, whether individually or collectively, of a law for the self. For Marx, the ultimate normative standard is the idea of human self-mastery attained through the rational provision for human needs. And in Nietzsche the ultimate normative standard is the maximum creativity of the human will, and the joy that comes in reordering or reshaping the world in conformity with the strength and vitality of one's own volition.

Now I certainly do not wish to deny that liberal political theorists from Mill to Rawls offer salutary and sensible guidance concerning the business of being a good, decent, sensible citizen of the liberal polity; and citizenship in a decent, sensible, liberal polity is not a negligible good. However, a theorist like myself shrinks back in horror at the thought of a tradition of political philosophy composed exclusively of decent liberals like Mill and Rawls, without the intellectual extremists like Plato and Rousseau and Nietzsche. In fact, there is something absurdly self-emasculating in the reproach commonly directed by liberals against Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche for having composed a body of work that was ripe for ideological misuse by Jacobins, Stalinists, and fascists respectively. To be sure, one has little reason to doubt that our political world of the last two centuries would have been a decidedly safer place if Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche had practiced theory in more or less the way that John Stuart Mill practiced theory. Yet the point of theory isn't to think safe thoughts; rather, the point is to open intellectual horizons, which one is hardly likely to do with much effectiveness unless one hazards dangerous thoughts. Without Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche, our political world might well be a safer world; but unquestionably, our \textit{intellectual} world would be radically impoverished if the great critics within the tradition had been merely Swiss and German clones of John Stuart Mill (think of Wilhelm von Humboldt! - perhaps the most soporific political philosopher who ever lived). The greatest theorists are always dangerous precisely because they practice theory in a way that doesn't betray the essential mission of the theorist.

If I am right, the great virtue of theory in its contribution to social experience is not the 'connectedness' of the theorist-critic (as a leading
contemporary account would have it), but the possibility of tremendous
distance from the prevailing norms of social experience. This may help
to clarify a statement in Chapter 16 that will again likely strike many read-
ers as paradoxical. There I present myself as both antiliberal and anti-
communitarian. How can this be? Needless to say, many of the essays
in this collection (especially those in Part I) arose out of the 'liberal–com-
munitarian debate' that gripped political theory in the 1980s. It was a sta-
ple of that debate that to be a critic of liberalism was to be a partisan of
something called ‘community.’ In response, liberals rightly protested the
folly of giving a blank cheque to the claims of community as such (as if
there were something equally elevating about communal experience of
whatever description). But as an avowed critic of liberalism, I have no
desire simply to replace the liberal’s principle of rational autonomy with
a principle of communal identity, nor to see the latter principle spared
the same degree of theoretical scrutiny to which liberal ideals ought to be
submitted. As I see the matter, the problem with liberal theory is not that
it leaves community out of account but that it fails to offer a sufficiently
robust challenge to the individualistic self-understanding of contempo-
rary social life. If ‘communitarianism’ requires that one yield up a blanket
affirmation of community, regardless of content, then communitarian
theory becomes subject to precisely the same objection – namely, that it
falls short of the calling of theory, which is to issue fearlessly radical chal-
lenges to existing self-understandings.

We live in spiritless times. But this would be a blander assertion than it
is intended to be if it sufficed, as a remedy to this spiritlessness, to come to
a richer awareness of our communal attachments and historical identity.
This is why the communitarian ‘alternative’ fails. It should also help
explain why I am of the view that the whole liberal–communitarian debate
falls short of the mark. To hit the mark, we have to begin by acknowledging
just how much in contemporary life is sordid, empty, mechanical, and
dispiriting. Or, alternatively, we need an account of why this grim picture
is untrue, of the ways in which the social reality of contemporary life is in
fact rich with meaning and purpose – an account that, so far as I am aware,
no one has yet supplied. The real problem with liberalism as a political phi-
losophy is that it refuses to take up this challenge, on the grounds that indi-
viduals, as self-directing centres of moral agency, must come to their own
verdicts concerning the lives they live; ambitious judgments on the part of
the theorist with respect to meaningful substance in contemporary life, or
the lack of it, illegitimately impinge on the right of individuals to judge
these things for themselves. Now, is it the case that this abdication on the
part of liberal social philosophers is remedied by communitarianism? Not necessarily. By itself, the communitarian thesis concerning the social constitution of the self tells us nothing about the richness or banality, dignity or degradation, of the selves thus constituted. It all depends, of course, on the substantive character of the communities that are doing the constituting of selfhood. Indeed, it is sometimes the case that individuals react against the emptiness and spiritlessness of contemporary experience by embracing bonds of community and religion in their most tribal, zealous, and illiberal incarnations. This is not an alternative to the liberal predicament, but a reconfirmation, in mirror image, of the very ill that one means to flee. Again, a blanket affirmation of community in general seems to entail a theoretical abdication that exactly matches the one with which I tax liberal theorists. The solution is not to embrace community over against individualism, or to embrace individualism over against the sometimes oppressive demands of the community, but rather to subject both the individual and the community to a more searching interrogation in a fully ambitious theoretical dimension – that is, with respect to judgments about the substance of a satisfying life.

What these essays, I hope, teach (and the concluding chapters on judgment are intended to underscore this lesson) is that it is possible to combine a taste for the most exalted theory with a respect for the most down-to-earth practical prudence: that one can be a high-flying Platonist in one's conception of theory without losing sight of the fact that practical decisions should be governed by experience and historically informed prudence. Indeed, if prudence possesses an autonomous integrity of its own, and can therefore be trusted to look after itself, then the theorist need not be merely a handmaiden to prudence, and theory is liberated to pursue a higher calling. As a citizen, I am committed to many or most of the same policies and political goals as are professed by leading liberal philosophers of our day; but as a theorist, I nonetheless insist on presenting myself as a critic of liberalism because I am convinced that theoretical understanding of our own social world (namely, the galaxy of liberal experience as I define it in Chapter 1) requires exertions of self-questioning that test the boundaries of that world. In this sense, we are likely to understand ourselves at a deeper fathom by exposing ourselves to the challenge of the alien thought-worlds of (for instance) Augustine, Rousseau, de Maistre, Marx, and Heidegger than by contenting ourselves with the familiar verities of the contemporary descendants of Locke and Mill.

Most of the essays and reviews in this collection were written because vari-
ous editors and organizers of conferences solicited them, so I have them to thank for this book; among my editors, Philippa Ingram of the T.H.E.S. and Jeffrey Friedman of Critical Review deserve special thanks. Thanks are also due to the journals and publishers that gave permission for republication. This seems a good opportunity to express my gratitude for the generous assistance that I have received from two sources: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which provided a general research grant; and the University of Toronto, which provided a Connaught Research Fellowship during the spring of 1996. I would also like to express my deep thanks to friends and colleagues – in particular, Edward Andrew, Alkis Kontos, and Stephen Newman – who have helped make the Toronto chapter of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought such an important forum for the practice of political theory in Toronto. This gathering has been a continuous source of valuable stimulation; several of the essays in this collection were presented to the CSPT group, which provided me with very helpful friendly criticism. Finally, I'd like to thank two other colleagues: Thomas Pangle, both for his extremely thoughtful critical response to Chapter 13 and for kindly agreeing to allow his letter to be published here; and Jennifer Nedelsky, for presenting me with an equally thoughtful and challenging critical response to Chapter 20.