

EMANCIPATORY EPISTEMOLOGY

Quassim Cassam

University of Warwick, UK

Roughly three decades ago, Louise Antony claimed that ‘what unites philosophers who choose to characterize their own work as “feminist” is the conviction that philosophy ought to matter – that it should make a positive contribution to the construction of a more just, humane, and nurturing world than the one we currently inhabit’ (1993: 145). A philosophy that is capable of making such a contribution would have a strong claim to be regarded as *emancipatory* or as *liberatory*. According to Antony, it is not just philosophy that is capable being emancipatory but *analytic* philosophy. In her paper, which is entitled ‘Quine as Feminist: The Radical Import of Naturalized Epistemology’, she identifies W. V. O. Quine as a philosopher in the analytic tradition whose naturalistic approach to the study of knowledge ‘promises enormous aid and comfort’ to those ‘attempting to expose and dismantle the oppressive intellectual ideology of a patriarchal, racist, class-stratified society’ (1993: 113).¹

To suppose that philosophy can make the contribution that Antony describes is to suppose that it can contribute to social or political change. It is one thing to believe that social or political philosophy can do this, but theoretical philosophy is in a rather different position. How can the abstract theorizing of epistemologists or metaphysicians or philosophers of mind contribute to making the world a better place in the senses that Antony has in mind? She regards theoretical philosophy, including Quine’s naturalized epistemology, as potentially emancipatory in a social or political sense but how can this be so? Indeed, cynics might detect in such claims more than an element of wishful thinking, of leftist theoretical philosophers wanting to believe, but having no good grounds to believe, that they can somehow contribute to the achievement of their political objectives by doing theoretical philosophy.

To make it plausible that theoretical philosophy can contribute to changing social reality, what is needed is a theory of change which identifies a pathway from theoretical philosophy to social change.² For Antony, it seems that theoretical philosophy makes its distinctive contribution by undermining the oppressive intellectual ideologies which sustain oppressive political or social arrangements. To undermine such ideologies by philosophical argument is to engage in what is sometimes called *ideology critique*.³ For Antony, Quine contributes to the construction of a more just, humane, and nurturing world than the one we currently inhabit by assisting feminist and other philosophers who are engaged in a particular form of ideology critique, the critique of the oppressive intellectual ideology of a patriarchal, racist, class-stratified society.

There are many reasons to be sceptical both about Quine's contribution to this type of ideology critique and the ability of ideology critique to contribute to ideological change, let alone social change. The best defence of ideology critique is to be found in the work of Tommy Shelby, who argues that it is possible not only to understand but to *change* social reality 'by engaging in overly abstract theorizing' (2003: 155).⁴ Yet, despite Shelby's efforts, it is still obscure how abstract theorizing can do what he says it can do. Political change is usually the result of political rather than philosophical action. An effective type of political action is civil resistance, which Erica Chenoweth defines as 'a form of collective action that seeks to affect the political, social, or economic status quo without using violence or the threat of violence against people to do so' (2021: 1). The objective of civil resistance campaigns is not just to 'affect' the status quo but to *transform* it and thereby to emancipate large numbers of people – workers, women, slaves - from social or political oppression. What does this have to do with ideology critique?

The concern is not that civil resistance or political action more generally has no use for theory. Radical philosophers from Marx to bell hooks have argued for the essential unity of theory and practice in political action. As the saying goes, theory without practice is empty, but practice without theory is blind.⁵ However, while abstract theorizing might indeed contribute to human

emancipation by guiding or inspiring political action, the kind of abstract theorizing that can do this is surely not the abstract theorizing of professional epistemologists and metaphysicians. While Quine's philosophical ideas have been taken up by some feminists, the political impact of his reflections on knowledge, meaning and truth is virtually undetectable since they have little to do with political action.

In light of these reflections philosophers like Antony who make bold claims about the supposed emancipatory potential of theoretical philosophy might be accused of magical as well as wishful thinking since they offer no account of how philosophy is supposed to deliver the advertised social and political goods.⁶ Indeed, one can imagine a certain kind of philosophical purist saying that not only is it not possible for theoretical philosophy to deliver such goods, but that it would not be its business to try to change social or political reality *even if it could*. What counts in philosophy is 'getting it right' (Williams 2014: 367), whatever the 'it' is. If social or political change is what one is after, then one should be a social or political activist.

Yet there are many examples of theoretical philosophy having a worldly impact, though not necessarily a positive impact. Daniel Dennett claims that 'philosophers aren't so innocuous after all' and that sometimes their views 'can have terrifying consequences that might actually come true'.⁷ His example is post-modernism: 'what the postmodernists did was truly evil' because they 'made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts'. If cynicism is socially or politically harmful, then one thing that theoretical philosophers can usefully do is to counteract the bad theoretical philosophy that produces it.

However, those who regard theoretical philosophy as emancipatory want more than this. They think it is not enough that some theoretical philosophers correct the politically pernicious errors of other theoretical philosophers. Apart from anything else, there is no guarantee that politically pernicious ideas will be philosophically indefensible. For those who share Antony's vision of

philosophy, the ideal is a type of theoretical philosophy that is philosophically defensible *and* makes a positive contribution in its own right to human emancipation. Whether such a thing is possible remains to be seen, but it is worth noting that helping to change existing political or social arrangements is something that philosophy can do intentionally or unintentionally. One type of emancipatory philosophy *sets out* to do what Antony says philosophy should do but if Quine's philosophy is emancipatory, it is not so by design.

A way to make the point is to distinguish four basic kinds of philosophy:

1. Philosophy of the *first* kind tries to be emancipatory and is.
2. Philosophy of the *second* kind tries to be emancipatory but isn't.
3. Philosophy of the *third* kind doesn't try to be emancipatory and isn't.
4. Philosophy of the *fourth* kind doesn't try to be emancipatory but is.

Most philosophy is of the third kind, and some is of the second kind. Antony's ideal is the first kind of philosophy. Perhaps the most we can hope for is philosophy of the fourth kind, that is, an accidentally emancipatory philosophy, but it turns out that Quine's philosophy, like so many others in the analytic tradition, is of the third kind.

The following discussion will focus on the extent to which *epistemology* can be emancipatory in Antony's sense. Part 2 will discuss the emancipatory potential of naturalized epistemology. Part 3 will focus on the limitations of ideology critique as a form of liberatory epistemology. Part 4 will consider whether *any* form of philosophical theorizing can contribute to human emancipation and whether making such a contribution should ever be the primary objective of philosophy. Finally, part 5 will reflect on the relationship between the value of getting it right in philosophy and contributing to emancipation. In the final analysis, Antony's vision of what theoretical philosophy can achieve is hard to defend, though it is easy to see why progressively minded philosophers are so keen to defend it.

2. Naturalized epistemology and emancipation

Consider again Antony's description of Quine's epistemology as offering 'aid and comfort' to those attempting to expose and dismantle the oppressive intellectual ideology of a patriarchal, racist, class-stratified society. Suppose that S is one of the things that sustains racism or patriarchy and therefore *sustains* human oppression. Then anything that directly undermines S or provides aid and comfort to philosophers seeking to undermine S can be seen as contributing to human emancipation by virtue of undermining something that sustains human oppression. For Antony, S is an ideology, and naturalized epistemology is emancipatory in virtue of its role in undermining this ideology.⁸ Since naturalized epistemology does not set out to play this role, it is at best unintentionally emancipatory. It would belong to the fourth of the four kinds of philosophy distinguished above.

Three questions now arise:

1. What is an ideology?
2. What is the particular oppression-sustaining intellectual ideology which Antony has in mind?
3. What is naturalized epistemology's contribution to exposing and dismantling this ideology?

Antony's conception of ideology can be inferred from her discussion of what she calls the 'Draught theory of knowledge' and the role of naturalized epistemology in undermining this theory. The Draught theory is strongly foundationalist, it takes the foundational level to be constituted by reports of sensory experience, and is committed to a variety of sharp distinctions, such as that between observation and theory. The Draught theory is also tied to a particular ideal of scientific objectivity. This ideal is an 'ideology' in Antony's sense. According to this ideology, objectivity is a matter of perfect neutrality. It requires the complete 'divestiture of

theoretical commitments, of personal goals, of moral values, of hunches and intuitions' (1993: 132). Antony speculates that 'the Dagnet theory of knowledge, together with the ideal of objectivity it supports, might play a role in the preservation of oppressive structures' (1993: 132). It is this speculation that opens the way for naturalized epistemology to contribute to human emancipation.

Antony thinks that 'the Dagnet theory is *wrong*' (1993: 136) and that naturalized epistemology that shows that it is wrong. As she puts it, 'a naturalized approach to knowledge provides us with *empirical* grounds for rejecting pure neutrality as an epistemic ideal, and for valuing those kinds of "biases" that serve to trim our epistemic jobs to manageable proportions' (1993: 139). Indeed, the insight that 'perfect objectivity is not only impossible but undesirable' (1993: 126) is one that Antony initially attributes to the rationalists, who saw innate ideas as performing 'the salutary function of narrowing down to a manageable set the hypotheses that human minds have to consider when confronted with sensory data' (1993: 125).

We now have Antony's answers to all three questions: an ideology in the present context is an *ideal*. Specifically, it is an ideal of epistemic practice. The oppression-sustaining ideal that is her target is an ideal of objectivity in epistemic practice, an ideal that is sustained by a *theory of knowledge* – the Dagnet theory. And naturalized epistemology's unwitting contribution to exposing and dismantling the ideal is to undermine the Dagnet theory. Once this theory is out of the way, our only option is to 'study knowledge by studying the knower' (1993: 137). To do this in the manner that Quine recommends is to do naturalized epistemology.

This attempt to explain how naturalized epistemology contributes to human emancipation must be deemed a failure because it attacks the wrong target. Antony's target is a conception of scientific objectivity, but it is far-fetched that this conception of objectivity, or the theory of knowledge by which it is sustained, plays a significant role in the preservation of oppressive

structures. The key claim linking oppression with a conception of objectivity is both highly speculative and highly implausible. Its manifest implausibility can be brought out by reference to *actual* oppressive structures rather than oppressive structures in the abstract. For example, one might think about the systematic oppression of women in Afghanistan or about the oppression of blacks under apartheid in South Africa or during the era of slavery in 19th century America.

It would be bizarre to think that *these* structures of oppression are sustained by, of all things, an ideal of objectivity or by a theory of knowledge. In some of these cases, social oppression is sustained by religious fundamentalism. In others, it is sustained by white supremacy, which explicitly rejects the ideal of neutrality. America today does not have slavery, but it incarcerates African Americans on a massive scale. This is what oppressive structures look like in practice, and they have little or nothing to do with the epistemic and scientific ideals that are allegedly threatened by naturalized epistemology. Antony attacks the wrong target even if she is right about the ability of naturalized epistemology to destroy the target, a target against which she thinks that rationalism offers independently compelling arguments.

It is not difficult to diagnose the problem. Antony is stuck on the horns of a dilemma. She either has to identify an ideology which Quine's theory of knowledge undermines but which plays a negligible role in sustaining actual oppressive structures or she has to identify an ideology which plays a substantial role in sustaining oppressive structures, but which Quine's theory of knowledge fails to undermine. Antony opts for the first horn, but the second horn is no better. For example, racism is supported by racist ideology. As Shelby notes, this ideology's most fundamental illusion is 'arguably the belief that "races" exist at all' (2003: 168). Thus, one might begin one's assault on racist ideology by noting that systems of racial classification have no legitimate scientific basis. From a naturalistic perspective, one might be happy to applaud an assault along these lines, but naturalized epistemology has little to contribute beyond its

approbation. Naturalized epistemology is primarily a view about the relationship between how we arrive at our beliefs and how we ought to arrive at our beliefs. It holds that epistemological questions should be *replaced* by psychological questions since the latter ‘hold all the content there is in epistemological questions’ (Kornblith 1994: 7). However, this observation does not contribute anything of substance to the demolition of racist ideology.

The lesson is that Quine’s philosophy belongs to the third rather than the fourth of the four kinds distinguished above. It doesn’t try to be emancipatory, and it isn’t. However, despite the failure of Antony’s argument, one might still think that there is something correct about the shape of her strategy, even if its implementation is flawed. Her strategy might be described as emancipation by ideology critique (EIC). The basic idea is that epistemology can contribute to human emancipation via an epistemic critique of the ideology or ideologies by which various forms of oppression are sustained. She might be wrong to focus on scientific objectivity, but she is not wrong to focus on ideology. If oppressive structures are sustained by oppressive ideologies, then it ought to be possible to weaken those structures by undermining their ideological supports. Consider this analogy: if a bridge is supported by pillars, then weakening the pillars will weaken the bridge. It is too much to expect ideology critique to *dismantle* oppression-sustaining ideologies, but it is not too much to expect it to weaken or undermine them. The mistake is to expect naturalized epistemology to do the undermining.

EIC faces a number of challenges. For example, one might wonder about the efficacy of epistemic critiques of oppressive ideologies. Is there any compelling evidence that racist and other oppressive ideologies have actually been undermined by epistemological critiques? Much depends, of course, on the meaning of ‘undermined’. It may well be true that epistemological and scientific critiques have refuted the core assumptions of racist ideology, but racism is alive and well in America. Yet ‘many of its illusions have been diagnosed and submitted to ideology critique many times over’ (Shelby 2003: 168). The problem is that epistemic critiques of

ideology are notoriously bad at changing people's minds. Furthermore, oppressive structures are sustained by more than ideology. Dismantling oppression-sustaining ideologies, even if such a thing were possible, is not like removing all the supports of a bridge. It is much more like removing a single supporting pillar while leaving the bridge standing. These and other issues with EIC are brought into focus by Shelby's account of ideology critique. Shelby wants ideology critique to be philosophy of the first kind, one that tries to be emancipatory and is. The worry is that it turns out to be a philosophy of the second kind: it tries to be emancipatory but fails.

3. Ideology critique and emancipation

Shelby's thesis is that 'ideology-critique is indispensable for understanding and resisting the forms of oppression that are characteristic of the modern world' (2003: 154). An ideology is a form of social consciousness, a network of entrenched and subjectively compelling beliefs that are tied to action and social practices. A form of social consciousness need not be an ideology, that is, need not be epistemically or morally unsound. For Shelby:

A form of social consciousness is an ideology if and only if (i) 'its discursive content is epistemically defective, that is, distorted by illusions; (ii) through these illusions it functions to establish or reinforce social relations of oppression; and (iii) its wide acceptance can be (largely) explained by the class-structured false consciousness of most of those who embrace it (2003: 183-4).

Thus, a form of social consciousness is an ideology in virtue of some of its *epistemic*, *functional*, and *genetic* properties.⁹ Correspondingly, there are three varieties of ideology critique: epistemic critique, functional critique, and genetic critique. Epistemic critique is the epistemologist's contribution to EIC.

An epistemic critique is concerned with the cognitive defects of ideologies. Ideologies ‘purport to be forms of knowledge and thus cannot be rationally rejected or accepted without epistemic grounds for doing so’ (2003: 165). This is the point at which ideology critique links up with epistemology. Ideologies ‘make faulty claims to knowledge; they mislead and distort; they create and spread myths; they misinform and conceal’ (2014: 68). Epistemology unmasks these defects. The epistemic dimension of ideology critique does not assume that epistemologists or anyone else have privileged access to the ultimate truth about social reality. It only assumes that ‘some claims are true or well-grounded and others false or ill-grounded’ (2003: 163). It is ‘the task of the specifically *epistemic* dimension of ideology-critique to unmask or reveal the illusory character of ideologies’ (2003: 169).

Suppose that the illusory character of a particular ideology is unmasked by ideology-critique. To see why this might not change many minds, it needs to be understood that ideologies are forms of *false consciousness* that are held irrationally. Those with a false consciousness ‘cling to a system of belief, not because of its epistemic warrant, but because it serves some noncognitive interest’ (2003: 170). The efficacy of ideology critique is called in question by the fact that ‘we are sometimes prompted to accept beliefs by motives that have little to do with a concern for truth and justification’ (2003: 171). To the extent that ideological illusions have non-rational motives, why should we expect ideology critique to change the minds of the afflicted? Racist ideology is a case in point. Shelby concedes that racial scapegoating continues after the illusions of racist ideology have been diagnosed and submitted to ideology critique many times over. Why is that? Because racist beliefs are so often held with false consciousness and are therefore unresponsive to rational criticism. Such criticism is unlikely to result in the repudiation of their racist beliefs by racists who are motivated to accept racist ideological illusions because of the unconscious influence of non-cognitive motives.

This does not mean that ideology critique is not worthwhile. It is important that the epistemic defects of racist ideologies are pointed out, but the present concern is with *change*, and specifically with whether abstract theorizing in the form of ideology critique can change social reality. For Shelby, ideological *beliefs* are ‘the primary object of ideology-critique’ (2003: 157) but if ideology critique cannot even change what people *believe* or prove to *their* satisfaction – and not just to the critic’s satisfaction – the illusory nature of their ideological beliefs, it is difficult to see how it is going to result in social change.¹⁰ The issue here is different from the one facing Antony. It isn’t that Shelby’s version of ideology critique attacks the wrong target – racism is the right target - or that it is incapable of destroying its target in the sense of uncovering its many epistemic flaws. The issue is that ideology critique generally fails to produce the desired social changes even after it has effectively dismantled its ideological target.

The focus so far has been on the role of noncognitive *psychological* motives in sustaining ideological beliefs, but ideology critique also faces a challenge which is more sociological than psychological. As Shelby points out, ‘without a change in the social relations of power that give rise to them, the mere criticism of ideologies, no matter how relentless or devastating from a purely intellectual point of view, will not be sufficient to eliminate ideological social consciousness’ (2003: 187). However, if the point of ideology critique was to produce a change in social reality, but ideology critique cannot dismantle its ideological targets without a prior change in the social reality that gives rise to them, then it would seem that ideology critique is either useless or redundant. It is useless without a change in social relations of power, that is, without a change in social reality already having occurred, but if such a social change has already taken place, then there is no need for ideological critique to make it happen.

This argument is less decisive than it seems since it is questionable whether ideology critique is only successful given a *prior* change in social relations. One might instead think of ideology critique and social change as parts of a single complex process in which the direction of causal

influence is not unidirectional.¹¹ Ideology critique is enabled by social change, but the latter is in turn enabled by ideological change. This would be in line with Shelby's insight that 'there can be no doubt that ideologies play a significant role in structuring social relations, any more than there could be that ideologies are structured by such relations' (2003: 178). However, a combination of false consciousness and the fact that ideologies have a solid basis in existing social relations poses a serious challenge to the project of EIC. Another challenge comes from philosophers who question this project's elitism. As Sally Haslanger puts it, 'the complaint is that the theorist, relying on fancy training and purporting to occupy a privileged objective standpoint, just swoops in and tells the ignorant masses what they ought to believe' (2017: 5). It should come as no surprise if the masses do not listen.

Taken together, the various concerns about ideology critique mentioned above, as well as many others which have not been mentioned, suggest that EIC fails to deliver on the promise to explain how abstract theorizing can not only improve our *understanding* of social reality but also *change* social reality. Ideology critique is undoubtedly a valuable diagnostic tool but not, it seems, an agent of change. The conclusion one might draw from this is that contrary to what Shelby suggests, it is not possible to change social reality by 'overly abstract theorizing'. The proposal that social reality can be changed by such theorizing looks like a piece of magical thinking because it misses an obvious point: political change is usually the result of *political action*. What is needed, therefore, is an account of how abstract theorizing, whether in the form of ideology critique or some other form, connects with political action.

4. A theory of change

How does philosophy lead to social or political change? If one were to ask how the work of academic economists leads to social or political change, one would have no great difficulty in giving an answer. For example, in the 1970s, Milton Friedman's economic theories influenced

the economic thinking and political agendas of political leaders and parties in several countries. The implementing of Friedman's ideas by leaders such as Margaret Thatcher had huge social, political, and economic consequences for the countries they led.¹² The result was a political transformation. In this case, Friedman's abstract economic theorizing contributed to social change via its influence on the political actions of key political actors, even if it is arguable that the changes would have happened anyway, and that Friedman's work provided them with an economic rationale rather than initiated them.

Is there a similar story to be told about the impact of philosophy? Thatcher was influenced by Friedrich Hayek, who was a philosopher as well as an economist, and Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* influenced the libertarian right in America. President Reagan did not read Nozick, but others in his political circle did.¹³ Nozick's book was written in response to Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, whose political influence has been less obvious but is nevertheless real. Jonathan Wolff suggests that Rawls has influenced the direction of the British Labour Party, but 'by seepage rather than name' (2023: 5). Rawls' demand that society be arranged to make the worst off as well off as possible certainly has emancipatory potential.¹⁴

Hayek, Nozick and Rawls contributed to change by influencing the thoughts and actions of those who hold, or held, the levers of power. There is no magical thinking here since there is a clear causal pathway from philosophical thought to political change. This view is perfectly compatible with the notion that political change is usually the result of political action. Political action is the mechanism of change.¹⁵ Political leaders still need to act to transform the social and political landscape. In Britain and America, they acted by enacting legislation and campaigning for their philosophically inspired vision of the good society. In other places, most notably Chile and elsewhere in Latin America, political leaders acted by staging military coups and installing repressive dictatorships to realize their political, economic, and philosophical vision.

Unfortunately, there is little here to encourage philosophers who think that epistemology can be emancipatory. Apart from the obvious fact that the influential thinkers cited so far were not primarily epistemologists, there are two additional reasons for not seeing them as a source of inspiration from a progressive standpoint. First, with the exception of Rawls, the figures cited so far were on the political right. This does not mean that they had no interest in human emancipation. They *were* interested in freedom as they understood it – for example, freedom from the state and from taxation – but this was not emancipation as progressives understand it. As a result, the political and social changes that Friedman and Hayek inspired were reactionary rather than emancipatory. Far from reducing social inequality, these changes reinforced it. Far from enhancing the rights of workers they diminished them. Furthermore, the political actions which implemented the ideas of such right-wing thinkers were the actions of political leaders rather than the masses. The implied model of political change is top-down rather than bottom-up, but an emancipatory epistemology should not be content with a vision of change as driven exclusively by political elites.

The following remarks by Martha Nussbaum offer a more hopeful vision of theory-inspired emancipatory change:

For a long time, academic feminism in America has been closely allied to the practical struggle to achieve justice and equality for women. Feminist theory has been understood by theorists as not just fancy words on paper; theory is connected to proposals for social change. Thus feminist scholars have engaged in many concrete projects: the reform of rape law, winning attention and legal redress for the problems of domestic violence and sexual harassment; improving women's economic opportunities, working conditions, and education; winning pregnancy benefits for female workers; campaigning against the trafficking of women and girls in prostitution; working for the social and political equality of lesbians and gay men (2012: 198).

Insofar as feminist scholars engaged in concrete projects have been influenced by feminist epistemology, this is starting to look like a vision of theoretical philosophy contributing to social change. For Nussbaum, it is a vision of how many American feminists are ‘theorizing in a way that supports material change and responds to the situation of the oppressed’ (2012: 215). However, while Nussbaum certainly cannot be accused of magical thinking in her theory of change, her vision is still limited in a number of ways. The concrete projects she describes are possible in America but not in many other countries where the situation of women and other oppressed groups is much worse. Furthermore, legal expertise is more relevant to the projects Nussbaum describes than expertise in epistemology. There is also the related question whether academic theorizing in any form represents the *best* way of addressing the issues listed by her. At best, it confronts these issues only indirectly and in abstract rather than concrete fashion. This is no doubt why, as she points out, ‘some theorists have left the academy altogether, feeling more comfortable in the world of practical politics, where they can address these urgent problems directly’ (2012: 198).

The many countries in which the route to social change described by Nussbaum is closed off include a good number in which social activists’ room for manoeuvre is limited by political repression. In these countries, and perhaps even in America, civil resistance in Chenoweth’s sense may be the best hope of meaningful social change. Civil resistance ‘tends to involve many different nonviolent techniques – like demonstrations, strikes, stay-aways, blockades, the creation of alternative institutions, and other forms of non-cooperation sequenced intentionally to dislodge entrenched power’ (Chenoweth 2021: 5). Rather than being a single action, civil resistance is a suite of political actions. What is more, it is ‘a stunningly successful method of creating change’ (2021: 13), when compared with more violent methods. If epistemology can be shown to shape, influence, or inspire civil resistance then this really *would* be a non-magical way for it to be emancipatory.

On the face of it, social and political philosophers are in a much better position to contribute to civil resistance than epistemologists. Effective civil resistance depends not just on the tactical acumen of campaigners for change but on a proper analysis of the failings and injustices of the established order. Furthermore, effective civil resistance depends on a vision of a more just and equal society, and this means that it depends on an implicit theory of justice. Social and political philosophers can articulate and justify this theory. For example, Rawls' work can provide a philosophical rationale for campaigns of civil resistance whose objective is political change which improves the situation of the least well-off members of society. If it was Rawls' intention to contribute via his philosophy to human emancipation, and if his philosophy has actually so contributed via its influence on political action, then this would make it a philosophy of the first kind. If he had no emancipatory ambitions, it might still qualify as a philosophy of the fourth kind. Either way, one might argue, Rawls needs an epistemology. Could this be where epistemology can do emancipatory work, albeit indirectly?

In his essay 'On Hating and Despising Philosophy', Bernard Williams notes that philosophers are motivated by curiosity but that is not their only motive: 'particularly in asking political and ethical questions, about justice, the rightful use of power, and what sorts of life might be worth living, they have wanted to be helpful. They have even hoped, some of them, to redeem or transform humanity' (2014: 364). However, discussions of ethics and politics have links with 'other more theoretical questions, about knowledge, action and psychology' (2014: 364). There is more than one way of understanding the nature of these links. However, if it is not possible for someone like Rawls to give satisfactory answers to ethical and political questions without answering, or having answers to, the theoretical questions with which they are linked, then it is not magical thinking to see theoretical philosophy as assisting in the project of transforming humanity. Effective political action requires answers to political and ethical questions, but the latter are not neatly separable from issues in theoretical philosophy, including epistemology.

Is it true, though, that effective political action requires answers to political and ethical questions? The radical abolitionists campaigned effectively for the emancipation of the slaves in 19th century America but what were the political and ethical questions to which they needed answers? On the political side, they needed to think about the merits and effectiveness of civil resistance compared with what would today be called terrorism. This is a political issue which they were capable of addressing without the help of political philosophers. On the ethical side, one might say that they needed an understanding of the injustice of slavery. Clare Chambers argues that ‘without some theory or principles of justice we cannot justify why something being done to us is an injustice rather than merely being something we don’t like’ (2017: 182-3). However, neither the radical abolitionists nor the enslaved needed a theory of justice to grasp the cruelty and injustice of slavery. If the radical abolitionists had a theory of justice, it was one which they were able to articulate without the help of political philosophers. They might have been nonplussed if asked how they knew that slavery was wrong, but this would not have prevented them from acting. Far from being a stimulus to action, epistemological concerns about one’s sense of right and wrong are more likely to result in scepticism and apathy.

This line of thought might be resisted on the grounds that it leads to an impoverished conception of political action. In her work, bell hooks berates radical activists who ‘perpetuate the idea that we can engage in black liberation and feminist struggle without theory’ (1994: 66). In her view, theory is a form of liberatory practice because theories are needed if we are to understand ‘the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance that would transform our current reality’ (1994: 67). Even if this is granted, however, it is far from obvious what kind of theorizing counts as a liberatory practice. Is theorizing about justice in the vein of John Rawls a liberatory practice? Feminist and Marxist theory are more likely to be viewed by radicals as liberatory, and an epistemology might count as emancipatory in virtue of its contribution to theoretical feminism or Marxism.

Feminists and Marxists certainly engage with issues in theoretical philosophy and some even express sympathy for naturalized epistemology. Here, then, is a theory of change that allows theoretical philosophy to make at least an indirect contribution to emancipatory social change. Where such change results from civil resistance, that is, from bottom-up political action, and resistance is guided by forms of liberatory theorizing to which epistemology makes a positive contribution, epistemology might be said to contribute to human emancipation. However, the emancipatory contribution of epistemology and other branches of theoretical philosophy is, on this account, so indirect as to be virtually undetectable. Most of what passes for epistemology in Anglo-American universities does not even make an indirect contribution to emancipatory political action, and any contribution is more likely to be accidental than intended.

Is this a satisfactory state of affairs? The philosophical purist described above will say that it is. From this perspective, it is not the business of the theoretical philosopher to tackle problems like injustice, inequality, or political repression. Theoretical philosophy has its own concerns, and its only interest should be in getting it right. Sometimes getting it right will have beneficial political consequences and sometimes not. Take the case of the post-modernists described by Dennett. Even if it is true that their criticisms of a certain idea of objectivity made it fashionable to be cynical about truth and facts, and that such cynicism played a role in the election of Trump in 2016, this does not invalidate their criticisms. Presumably, Rorty and other post-modernists did not *intend* to be lending philosophical support to someone like Trump, and the only valid critique of their critique of objectivity is philosophical. John McDowell remarks that it is ‘within the power of mere intellectuals’ (2005: 131) to undermine the discourse of objectivity, but if this is in their power then then it is also within their power to *rehabilitate* the discourse of objectivity.¹⁶ The way for mere intellectuals – philosophers - to do that is to exercise their philosophical power for the purpose of uncovering the philosophical flaws in the post-modernist’s arguments.

What should we make of the purist? On the one hand, one might point out that it is easy to be a purist when one is not the victim of injustice or repression. Philosophers who live under repressive regimes might be less comfortable about insisting on the purity of their discipline and its detachment from political questions. This is not doubt why so-called ‘liberation philosophy’ came to prominence in Latin America in the period of military dictatorships.¹⁷ The purist, it might be said, reeks of privilege, the privilege of living in places where they do not have to worry about their personal freedom or that of their fellow citizens. It is also paradoxical to defend a pragmatist like Rorty on the basis that the consequences of his philosophy do not matter.¹⁸ That said, there is also something right about Bernard Williams’ observation that ‘if philosophy, or anything like it, is to have a point, the idea of “getting it right” must be in place’ (2014: 367). The challenge for those who see epistemology as emancipatory is to find a way to accommodate this insight.

5. Getting it right

In an essay at the beginning of a recently published volume on *The Political Turn in Analytic Philosophy*, the three editors identify three central features of the alleged turn. The first consists in the use of the conceptual and theoretical tools of analytic philosophy to ‘shed light on some politically significant phenomena’ (Bordonaba-Plou et al: 2022: 3). The second distinguishes the political turn from a more general philosophical interest in shaping our collective lives in the interests of democracy and justice. Instead, the focus is on ‘identifying and addressing particular injustices’ affecting ‘disenfranchised groups’ (2022: 9-10). The third and, for present purposes, most significant aspect of the political turn is its commitment to ‘philosophical activism’. The philosophical activist ‘attempts to change the world through giving us a better understanding of certain unjust phenomena and power relations and equips us with certain tools for resistance and awareness’ (2022: 10). Hence, activists are not content merely to understand the world. Their objective is to have a certain causal effect on the world.¹⁹

To think of philosophy in this way is to think of it as having a distinctive orientation that flows from its ‘liberatory socio-political aims’ (2022: 14). Specifically, ‘the political turn in analytic philosophy must be understood as an explicit commitment to gear their theories or analysis towards social and political activism’ (2022: 5). Given that they are ‘motivated by the ambition of resisting oppression and injustices’, philosophical activists are ‘committed to orient their theories or analysis to such a purpose’ (2022: ix). Enough has already been said about the need to explain how theoretical philosophy can contribute to social and political change. However, even if philosophical activists were to come up with a plausible theory of change, how can an activist orientation be reconciled with the importance in philosophy of speaking the truth? Suppose that the philosophical truth about a particular topic contributes nothing to social or political change or even gives aid and comfort to political actors who oppose change or who question the reality of the injustices supposedly suffered by disenfranchised groups. In these circumstances, should philosophical activists put truth first or politics first?

When Williams suggests that if philosophy is to have a point, the idea of “getting it right” must be in place, what is the ‘it’ that philosophers must try to get right and what does ‘getting it right mean’ in practice? On the first of these issues, there is no doubt that the political turn in analytic philosophy has resulted in a shift in the questions that are asked by (some) analytic philosophers and in the assumptions they make in answering these questions. For example, instead of asking ‘what is knowledge?’ the philosophical activist asks ‘Who has the voice and power to transmit knowledge?’ (2022: ix). On the face of it, activists ask this question because they think that it is important to *know* who has the voice and power to transmit knowledge. They see no conflict between searching for the facts in such cases and pursuing their political objectives. After all, if it were not actually *true* that marginalized groups lack the power to transmit knowledge then it would not make sense for philosophical activists to try to remedy the situation. There would be nothing for them to remedy.

From the activists' perspective, the choice between putting truth first and putting politics first is a false one because their political and social objectives must be responsive to the political and social facts. The activist agrees with Shelby that 'we cannot adequately resist structures of power without a sober and accurate view' (2003: 174). For activists who are motivated by the ambition of resisting oppression and injustice, it cannot be a matter of indifference whether the social arrangements to which they object are actually oppressive and unjust. There must be a fact of the matter and the activism loses its rationale if the *moral* facts, as well as the social and political facts, are not as activists takes them to be. It is in this sense that, as Haslanger notes, 'the presupposition that there are *some* moral truths cannot be avoided by those engaged in justified political resistance' (2017: 165). This includes philosophical activists. Indeed, one might argue that activists must put *truth* first because their activism is worthless if it is not based on reality.

It might be objected that this line of argument misunderstands the worry about getting it right. Imagine a philosophical activist who is completely convinced by philosophical arguments for anti-realism or moral relativism or nihilism. At the same time, they can see that their political commitments presuppose a commitment to objective truth. It seems that something has to give. *Qua* metaphysician who cares deeply about getting things right the activist who is impressed by philosophical arguments for anti-realism must be prepared to endorse them regardless of their political implications. If, on the other hand, the activist puts politics first then they should be prepared to repudiate these arguments on *political* rather than strictly philosophical grounds. Activists have to choose, and they cannot get away with suggesting that their philosophical and their social or political views are always perfectly aligned.

It would take another paper satisfactorily to address this worry, so the following observations will have to suffice here. When there is a philosophical dispute between two standpoints – say moral realism and moral nihilism or, in epistemology, between internalism and externalism –

it is natural to think that the dispute can only properly be settled by *philosophical* argument. But what counts as a ‘philosophical’ argument and in what sense do philosophical arguments settle philosophical disputes? If a view is shown by armchair reflection to be self-contradictory or incoherent, then this might count as a case where ‘philosophical argument’ has settled a dispute. However, most interesting philosophical disputes cannot be settled so easily. Usually, there are arguments on both sides and no knockout blows. That is why philosophical disputes are so intractable and ultimate victory in philosophical debates is so elusive.

It is at this point that philosophical activists see an opening. They are sceptical about the insistence on settling philosophical disputes on strictly philosophical grounds, not least because it is so obscure what counts as strictly philosophical grounds. From their standpoint, there is no justification for saying that a philosophical view’s political or social consequences have no bearing on its correctness. So, for example, when Dennett asserts that post-modernism has terrifying political consequences, he is not making a point that, if correct, lacks *philosophical* significance. The fact that a particular view of truth has terrifying political consequences is a *reason* – even a philosophical reason – for rejecting it. A view that has terrifying consequences cannot be ‘getting it right’, not even getting it right philosophically speaking, and that is why a philosopher is justified in rejecting that view *qua* philosopher and not just *qua* activist.

If this sounds like a pragmatism, it is none the worse for that. It would be bizarre to think that the fact that a particular philosophical view has contributed to, say, the rise of fascism has no bearing on its philosophical correctness. Philosophical views have uses as well as consequences and the fact that one of two conflicting views is more useful, morally or politically, than its rival is a reason for preferring that view.²⁰ What counts as morally or politically useful will of course depend on one’s moral or political objectives, and what a political radical sees as a worthwhile objective might be regarded by a political conservative as morally and politically pernicious. There is no morally or politically neutral standpoint from which such disputes can

be resolved but this does not affect the main point on which the activist wants to insist. Their point is that they can and do have an interest in getting it right and they can and do respect the idea that if philosophy, or anything like it, is to have a point, the idea of “getting it right” must be in place. For them, getting it right *is* in place when it is properly understood.

This does not amount to a vindication of activism because it remains the case that activists do not yet have a satisfactory theory of change. The verdict on the charge that activists put politics before truth is ‘not proven’ but the verdict on activism’s conception of its contribution to social and political change is much less favourable. Why, then, does philosophical activism seem so attractive? First, there is the respectable thought that ‘one must understand the world as a *condition* of changing it’ (Krishnan 2023: 274). What, Nikhil Krishnan asks, ‘could be smugger than the idea that one knows the world well enough to set about changing it with revolutionary violence?’ (2023: 274).²¹ Although activists are not committed to changing the world through revolutionary violence, the question is still a good one. Would it not be irresponsible for anyone to argue and act for political change without understanding the system they are trying to change and why it needs changing? Something along these lines is implicit in Shelby’s talk of understanding and changing the world by abstract theorizing. We need to understand the world if we are to act responsibly in trying to change it, and there is no hope of understanding without abstract theorizing.

The problem remains, however, that understanding is insufficient for political change, even if it is necessary for *responsible* change. Having employed one’s philosophical skills to analyse oppressive social arrangements and explain what their oppressiveness consists in, it still needs to be explained what abstract theorizing contributes to actually changing the *status quo* beyond helping political activists to understand it. Perhaps philosophical activists never supposed that abstract theorizing could be of any greater use than that. Maybe their claim all along was that helping to understand the world *is* their contribution to change.²² However, this is difficult to

reconcile with the activist's ambition to have a causal effect on the world. Merely to understand the world is not to do that. The activist's aim is 'not only to gain a better understanding of them but also, and mainly, to tackle the injustices and unfair power relations such as oppressions underlying such practices' (Bordonaba-Plou et al. 2022: 14).²³ It could hardly be clearer that, for activists, understanding social reality is not enough. If it were, it is arguable that they would in any case be better off studying politics, sociology, or history than philosophy.

Other explanations of the attractions of activism are even less flattering. For those with a social conscience, there is the consolation of believing that one's philosophical efforts are helping to make the world a better place, even if there is little evidence that this is the case. There is also a tendency to confuse philosophical with political radicalism. Both philosophical and political radicals are dissatisfied with the *status quo*, in one case with the philosophical *status quo* and in the other with the political *status quo*. Both are in the business of change or transformation, and it is easy to see why political radicals might be attracted by philosophical radicalism, by attempts to transform the philosophical mainstream as extensively as political radicals wish to transform the political mainstream. However, the clear lesson of the discussion above is that the relationship between philosophical and political radicalism is much more complicated than activists suppose.

This is not a reason for abandoning the activist project or giving up its liberatory aims. Instead, it is a reason for developing a theory of change to which activists can appeal when challenged to explain how philosophy can have the desired socio-political impact. The answer to sceptics who doubt that philosophy can be impactful in this sense is to point to cases where it *has* made a social or political difference, for good or ill. Even negative impacts are impacts, and if it is possible to understand how post-modernism has had terrifying consequences then it should be possible to understand how other philosophical theories can have more beneficial consequences. In both cases, the impact of philosophy on political action is the key.

Even if philosophical activism is armed with a theory of change, there is still the nagging worry that anyone with an interest in radical change would be better off as a political activist than as a philosophical activist. If political action is the key to radical change, then why not become a political activist?²⁴ Why bother with philosophical activism? A mundane answer to this question is that many philosophical activists are temperamentally better suited to philosophical than to political activism. However, the broader political context also makes a difference. In a supreme emergency, ‘when our deepest values and our collective survival are in imminent danger’ (Walzer 2004: 33), a preference for philosophical activism might look self-indulgent and cowardly. In more normal circumstances, philosophical activism is easier to justify, but the question still remains: how much does your philosophizing contribute to achieving your political objectives when compared with all the other things you could be doing to advance those objectives? This is a question to which, like the question about their theory of change, philosophical activists need to provide an answer.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (1971), *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by B. Brewster (London: NLB).
- Antony, L. (1993), ‘Quine as Feminist: The Radical Import of Naturalized Epistemology’, in L. Antony and C. Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boluder: Westview Press): 110-153.
- Bordonaba-Plou, D., Castro, V. and Torices, J. (2022), ‘Analytic Philosophy as Philosophical Activism’, in D. Bordonaba-Plou, V. Castro and J. Torices (eds.) *The Political Turn in Analytic Philosophy: Reflections on Social Injustice and Oppression* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter): 3-29.
- Campbell, J. and Cassam, Q. (2014), *Berkeley’s Puzzle: What Does Experience Teach Us?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Chambers, C. (2017), 'Ideology and Normativity', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 91: 175-95.
- Chandler, D. (2023), *Fair and Equal: What Would a Fair Society Look Like?* (London: Allen Lane)
- Chenoweth, E. (2021), *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Collingwood, R. G. (1939), *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Elliott, G. *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (London and New York: Verso).
- Fricker, M. (2007), *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Geuss, R. (1981), *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Ghate, D. (2018), 'Developing theories of change for social programmes: co-producing evidence-supported quality improvement', *Palgrave Communications* 4: 1-13.
- Haslanger, S. (2012), *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Haslanger, S. (2017), 'Culture and Critique', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 91: 149-73.
- hooks, b. (1994), *Teaching to Transgress: Teaching as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge).
- Kornblith, H. (1994), *Naturalizing Epistemology*, second edition, edited by H. Kornblith (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press).
- Krishnan, N. (2023), *A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy at Oxford 1900-60* (London: Profile Books).

Lippert-Rasmussen, K. (2017), 'The Nature of Applied Philosophy', in K. Lippert-Rasmussen and K. Brownlee (eds.) *A Companion to Applied Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell): 3-17.

McDowell, J. (2005), 'Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity', in J. Medina and D. Wood (eds.) *Truth: Engagements Across Philosophical Traditions* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing): 130-45.

Nelson, L. and Nelson, J. (2003), *Feminist Interpretations of W. V. Quine* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press).

Nuccetelli, S. (2020), *An Introduction to Latin American Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Nussbaum, M. (2012), *Philosophical Interventions: Reviews 1986-2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Quine, W. V. O. (1994), 'Epistemology Naturalized', in H. Kornblith (ed.) *Naturalizing Epistemology*, second edition, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press: 15-32.

Shelby, T. (2003), 'Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory', *The Philosophical Forum* 34: 153-88.

Shelby, T. (2014), 'Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism', *Du Bois Review* 11: 57-74.

Srinivasan, A. (2020), 'Radical Externalism', *Philosophical Review* 129: 395-431.

Tomlin, P. (2006), 'And Nozick begat Reagan?', *The Philosophers' Magazine* 33: 38-41.

Waldron, J. (2010), *Torture, Terror, and Trade-Offs: Philosophy for the White House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Walzer, M. (2004), *Arguing about War* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Williams, B. (2014), 'On Hating and Despising Philosophy', in *Essays and Reviews 1959-2002* (Princeton: Princeton University Press): 363-70.

Wolff, J. (2023), 'Justice for all?', *Times Literary Supplement* 6268: 4-5.

¹ Antony is by no means unique in seeing Quine’s philosophy as congenial to feminism. See the essays in Nelson and Nelson 2003 for many other examples of this reading of Quine. On the idea of a ‘naturalized’ epistemology, see Quine 1994 and the other essays in Kornblith 1994.

² In the fields of implementation and intervention science, a theory of change is ‘in essence no more than a planned route to outcomes: it describes the logic, principles and assumptions that connect what an intervention, service or programme does, and why and how it does it, with its intended results’ (Ghate 2018: 3). A ‘logic model’ is a ‘pictorial representation of the theory’ (Ghate 2018: 3). Unlike social programmes, philosophical interventions might not *intend* or *plan* to bring about social or political change, though some philosophical interventions are designed to cause change. A telling example of the latter type of philosophical intervention is Waldron 2010, whose subtitle (‘Philosophy for the White House’) clearly indicates the author’s desire to influence the government policy. Whether the change that results from an intervention is intended or unintended, a theory of change must specify a route to the outcome. This means that it must identify ‘mechanisms of change’ (Ghate 2018: 4). Compare Campbell and Cassam 2014: 30. Furthermore, theories of change must be empirically testable.

³ Geuss is a hugely influential account of the concepts of ideology and ideology critique.

⁴ The complete sentence from Shelby reads: ‘In clarifying the meaning of “ideology”, then, it is important that we not lose sight of the social reality that we wish to understand *and* change by engaging in overly abstract theorizing’ (2003: 155). Another philosopher who tries to account for the political significance of philosophical theorizing is Louis Althusser. Gregory Elliott memorably describes Althusser as ‘conceiving (and practising) philosophy as a *political intervention in theory* and a *theoretical intervention in politics*’ (1987: 198). See ‘Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon’ in Althusser 1971.

⁵ This saying has variously been attributed to Marx, Lenin, and – bizarrely – to Kant.

⁶ What they lack, in other words, is a theory of change.

⁷ The quotations from Dennett are taken from a 2017 interview with *The Guardian* newspaper ([Daniel Dennett: 'I begrudge every hour I have to spend worrying about politics' | Daniel Dennett | The Guardian](#)).

⁸ Antony's argumentative strategy is less clear than this makes it sound. Her paper is packed with overlapping strands of argument that are difficult to disentangle and, at least in some cases, even more difficult to understand.

⁹ See, also, Geuss 1981.

¹⁰ See Haslanger 2017 for a critique of Shelby's emphasis on beliefs.

¹¹ See Shelby 2003: 178.

¹² Thatcherism proved a disaster for the UK but that's another story.

¹³ See Tomlin for 2006 for a discussion of the extent to which the Reagan administration was influenced by Nozick's work.

¹⁴ See Chandler 2023 for a detailed working through of the policy implications of Rawls' theory. Wolff 2023 is an illuminating review of Chandler's book. Chandler shows what it would be for a philosophical work to be the basis of substantive and progressive social change. The challenge is to get policymakers to read Rawls and Chandler and to take their proposals seriously.

¹⁵ As noted above, a theory of change must identify mechanisms of change.

¹⁶ The title of McDowell's paper is 'Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity'.

¹⁷ See Nuccetelli 2020, chapter 9. The fundamental tenet of liberation philosophy is that 'philosophy should engage with "praxis" and be geared toward the economic, social, and ideological liberation of the oppressed' (Nuccetelli 202: 215).

¹⁸ There is more on this below.

¹⁹ According to Bordonaba-Plou et al., this makes activists applied philosophers in the following sense: ‘Philosophy is applied if, and only if, it is motivated by an ambition of having a certain causal effect on the world’ (Lippert-Rasmussen 2017: 10).

²⁰ On what Srinivasan calls an ‘ameliorative’ approach to epistemology, ‘the choice between internalist and externalist notions of justification should be guided by the following question: which view would be most morally or politically useful?’ (2020: 415). Srinivasan is guided by precisely this question in her defence of externalism.

²¹ In asking this question Krishnan is paraphrasing Williams.

²² Consider R. G. Collingwood’s observation that a truth that ought to be familiar to every human being is that ‘in his capacity as a moral, political, or economic agent he lives not in a world of “hard facts” to which “thoughts” make no difference, but in a world of “thoughts”; that if you change the moral, political, and economic “theories” generally accepted by the society in which he lives, you change the character of his world; and that if you change his own “theories” you change his relation to his world; so that in either case you change the ways in which he acts’ (1939: 147). This passage from Collingwood’s *Autobiography* is from the final chapter, on theory and practice. This chapter raises many important questions which cannot be addressed here.

²³ Other passages suggest a different picture. For example, there is the suggestion that philosophical activism ‘attempts to change the world through giving us a better understanding of certain unjust phenomena and power relations’ (Bordonaba-Plou et al. 2022: 10). The essay from which this quotation is taken contains multiple and non-equivalent descriptions of philosophy’s contribution to social and political change. There is a fundamental lack of clarity in philosophical discussions of this issue because of the absence of a theory of change.

²⁴ See, again, the Nussbaum quotation about feminists who have left the academy because they feel that they can address urgent problems more directly in the world of practical politics.