

GARY MADISON AND COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY

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Continental philosophy in Canada owes an enormous debt of gratitude to Professor Emeritus Gary B. Madison not only for his work as a founder and former president of the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy (formerly the Canadian Society for Hermeneutics and Postmodern Thought) but for his teaching and numerous graduate supervisions at McMaster University and, of course, for his research in hermeneutics and phenomenology, political and economic theory, and his recent turn in a more existential direction in *On Suffering* and *Philosophy, Suicide, and the Art of Living*. One wonders how many graduate students Professor Madison must have supervised over the last forty odd years, how many attended his seminar on hermeneutics and enjoyed conversation in his pipe-smoke-filled dining room. It is an impressive number, and the excellent reputation that the McMaster philosophy department enjoyed during his tenure was based in large part on his work. Madison's writings through the years are characterized by originality, impressive scholarship, and as anyone who has read his books can attest, conviction and an unmistakable literary voice. His books give the impression, particularly if one reads the voluminous endnotes, that he has read everything that there is, and knowing him as I do, I suspect that he has. Whether reading his work or talking to Professor Madison, the sense I have always been left with, from my undergraduate days to the present, is that I really must read more, learn several more languages, and get a dog—not a cat (the virtues of which I have never succeeded in getting him to see), a dog.

My topic in this brief paper is communicative rationality, a theme that takes us to the heart of philosophical hermeneutics and to which Madison has made an important contribution over the course of several books. While I cannot summarize that contribution in detail here—for this, I can do no better than to recommend reading his books—I propose, first, to describe a few of its highlights and, second, to pose a few questions for Madison that take a somewhat unusual focus on history. On the question of reason, Madison's point of departure is a distinction drawn by Paul Ricoeur between what the latter called "the most fundamental opposites in human exist-

ence”: discourse, or dialogue, and violence. Several times in his writings, Madison cites Ricoeur as follows:

Violence is always the interruption of discourse: discourse is always the interruption of violence. A violence that speaks is already a violence that is trying to be in the right, that is exposing itself to the gravitational pull of Reason and already beginning to renege on its own character as violence. The prime example of this is that the ‘tyrant’ always tries to get discourse on his side.... But in order to succeed tyranny has to seduce, persuade, flatter; it has never been the dumb exercise of brute force.¹

The concept of reason must be understood in terms of the dynamics of social reasoning: searching for justifications, listening and persuading, and appealing to the freedom of an interlocutor. Regarded phenomenologically, reason is not a metaphysical faculty of mind but a capacity and inclination to participate in the process of what Karl Jaspers called “boundless communication.”² Among Madison’s more succinct formulations of this point is the following:

To the degree that one engages in communicative understanding or rationality, seeking the uncoerced agreement of the other, to that very degree one is rejecting violence and is affirming, if only in a praxial or nonthematic manner, certain basic values. These hermeneutical values are those having to do with respect for the freedom and dignity of one’s conversational or dialogical partners. Since for an agreement to count as true it must be reached by noncoercive means, the right of one’s dialogical partners to equal and fair consideration cannot rationally be denied. The hermeneutical notion of “good will” points to a core precept of democratic pluralism: The other may possibly be right over against oneself and thus must be accorded a freedom equal to one’s own. Speaking of “community” and of “the plurality which is tied to the exercise of human reason,” Gadamer states: “[I]t belongs to the concept of reason, that one must always reckon with the possibility that the opposite conviction, whether of the individual or in the social order could be correct.” The notions of freedom and reason are, for hermeneutics, inseparable—such

¹ Gary Madison, *The Logic of Liberty* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 267.

² Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in our Time*, (tr.) S. Godman (London: SCM Press, 1952), 44.

that the highest principle of reason is, as Gadamer says, the “freedom of all.”³

Reason, then, must be thought together with speech, persuasion, but also freedom, and is thus appropriately regarded as an ethical concept far more than, or indeed instead of, an epistemological or metaphysical one.

To be rational in the preeminent sense of the word is to refuse all reticence and to open oneself to the questioning and the point of view of our interlocutor. Nothing is off limits to rational discussion; no speaker and no idea is above the fray of justification and criticism, none is forbidden to speak, and all are answerable for their views. All reasoned communication includes an orientation toward consensus and openness to whatever our interlocutors have to say, provided only that their message is not one of intolerance or violence. The rational frame of mind is inclined to listen and to learn, to pay attention to what is alien, to anticipate validity, and in general to take others seriously—which includes demanding a justification of their views. So conceived, reason exists only on a common basis and requires that we risk ourselves in the confrontation of ideas and strive for consensus. Rational thought does not stand above the fray of assertion and reply or announce its “findings” from some remote location. It does not emerge from its inner sanctum or descend from its mountaintop with the news of a revelation. Neither does it proceed in conformity with so many a priori “rules for the direction of the mind.” The truth of which Madison speaks is one that is invariably reached in common, never on a purely private basis. If we would seek a guarantee for the validity of our position, for Madison the only guarantee that is possible and that is needed is what emerges from uninhibited communication. Reason itself, then, is a process that drives us into ongoing communicative engagement.

Madison has traced the normative implications of this argument in a way that resembles in some respects the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel while rejecting the latter’s transcendental foundationalism and appeal to a counterfactual ideal communication community. Being firmly situated in the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics, the argument as he formulates it owes more to Gadamer and Ricoeur, but also Jaspers and Merleau-Ponty, than to Habermas and Apel. It owes a good deal as well to

³ Gary Madison, *The Politics of Postmodernity: Essays in Applied Hermeneutics* (Boston: Kluwer, 2001), 188. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PP.

what is called the New Rhetoric, for which “persuasion...is the opposite of coercion; when, in the exercise of communicative rationality, one attempts to persuade another, one is appealing to their best judgment and to their free agreement or ‘assent.’”⁴ Rational argumentation is a question less of methodology than of disposition—whether one comports oneself in a spirit of reasonableness or civility rather than coercion, for as Madison puts it: “Between violence and discourse it is necessary to choose.” (PP, 90) It is on this conception of reason, he has long maintained, that a politics of human rights and democracy has its philosophical basis.

Still more intriguing is Madison’s inclination at times to take this argument in an historical direction. Without proffering a fully elaborated philosophy of history, Madison on several occasions cites Gadamer’s Hegelian assertion that

there is no higher principle of reason than that of freedom. Thus the opinion of Hegel and thus our own opinion as well. No higher principle is thinkable than that of the freedom of all, and we understand actual history from the perspective of this principle: as the ever-to-be-renewed and the never-ending struggle for this freedom. (PP, 90)

Madison remarks that “Gadamer has no qualms about retelling one of the greatest metanarratives of all time, that of the progressive liberation of humankind” (PP, 24), and it is a metanarrative that Madison appears to second, particularly in his more recent work. Thus in *The Politics of Postmodernity*, he favourably cites Hegel’s classic statements that “the Eastern nations knew only that *one* is free: the Greek and Roman only that *some* are free; while *we* know that all men absolutely (man *as man*) are free,” and “the History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.” (PP, 141–42) More recently, Madison writes in *On Suffering*, in a section titled “The Meaning of History”:

What allows for hope is, as Christianity sees it, the possibility of the genuinely *new* occurring in the course of world history. Christianity stands in this regard in stark contrast to ancient thought which held that all things repeat themselves endlessly and that nothing really new ever comes to pass. The universe of the Stoics and other ancient thinkers was a universe that “is situated within

⁴ Gary Madison, *The Political Economy of Civil Society and Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 1998), 244.

an infinite void, and its duration within an infinite time, within which the periodic rebirths of the universe repeat themselves eternally.”⁵

With Christianity, Madison continues, “the tired old universe of antiquity is filled with fresh promise. For the first time in the history of the world, history has real meaning, for it is now moving in a definite direction, towards its fulfillment.... All history is now progressive history, the history of salvation, *Heilsgeschichte*, and is no longer, to borrow a phrase from Hegel, the repetition of the same old majestic ruin.”⁶

I would like, if it is not out of order, to put in a good word for majestic ruin. If Madison can cite in defense of his brief interpretation of world history such esteemed figures as Hegel, St. Augustine, and Jesus himself, I can at the very least cite Marcus Aurelius:

Consider the past; such great changes of political supremacies. You may foresee also the things that will be. For they will certainly be of like form, and it is not possible that they should deviate from the order of the things that take place now: accordingly to have contemplated human life for forty years is the same as to have contemplated it for ten thousand years. For what more will you see.⁷

Madison and I are not historians by profession, but we have both had the opportunity to contemplate human life for the last forty years, or thereabouts. What have we seen? When we survey the large course of human history, “majestic ruin” does appear to encapsulate a sizeable portion of the evidence. Proving this point is not possible in a short essay, so let me appeal instead to the reader’s historical knowledge, be it ancient, medieval, or modern. Which do we see: progressive history or the same old majestic ruin? The former judgment would seem to require some basis of comparison between the past and the present, but what would this be? When we sift through the evidence of recorded history for progress, what do we find? Consider a few randomly chosen examples. The Romans had Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Trajan; we have John A. MacDonald, Pierre Trudeau, and Steven Harper. The Romans had a senate; we have a

⁵ Gary Madison, *On Suffering: Philosophical Reflections on What It Means To Be Human* (Hamilton: Les Érables, 2009), 133.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (tr.) G. Long (New York: Dover, 1997), 52.

senate. The Romans, before Constantine, had many gods; we have one or none. The Romans had culture envy for the Greeks; we have culture envy for Hollywood. The Romans had the Colosseum and the Pantheon; we have shopping malls and suburbs. The Romans had gladiators; we have hockey players. The Romans had Cicero; we have Rawls. The Romans had triumphs; we have Santa Claus parades. We are speaking of incommensurables—movement in historical time that is neither forward nor backward, but simply movement, change, and contingency, rather as a conversation or a road takes a turn that is neither for the better nor the worse; it is simply a turn, a change in preference perhaps, not salvation history. It is doubtful that we are any more saved, or more grown up, than the Romans were. If we wish to follow the current trend that speaks of cultural evolution, we must divest this notion of progress or teleology; we are not, as it is said, “more evolved” than the Romans or anyone else.

All in all, I tend to side with the ancients, or at least Marcus Aurelius. I am also on the side of Friedrich Nietzsche when he stated that human history is the history of the will to power. If Madison has optimism on his side, I have pessimism on mine. I prefer to call it realism. If Madison has Christianity, I have paganism. Madison has Hegel and St. Augustine; I have no saints, but I do have Marcus and Nietzsche. We both have some pretty impressive names to back up our respective verdicts on world history, so perhaps we ought to call it a draw on that score and say something like this: there are no laws of history, no Hand of God working itself out beneath the rise and fall of events, neither the steady march of progress nor a decline and fall narrative but contingency and more contingency. Does Madison agree with this? He can answer for himself, but I gather he does not, for he has written:

Hermeneutics does not view history as something simply to be suffered, a matter of pure *contingency*, as Rorty would say. History, hermeneutics believes, is something to be actively *made*. History is what we, as free human agents, are responsible for making, though, of course, it is not, as Marx observed, something that we make out of whole cloth.” (PP, 153)

What is Madison’s position here? Does hermeneutics (Madisonian hermeneutics) have, or entail, a particular philosophy of history as, in his view, it entails a kind of ethics? History is not pure contingency, he writes, but a kind of ethical project, something to be fashioned by free historical actors. This sounds very plausible, and not at all like an endorsement of progress of the kind that was popular in the nineteenth century. I wonder if Madison could elaborate on this.

Pure contingency is what history looks like to me—on one hand what Michael Oakeshott called “the conversation of mankind and, on the other, violence, these two in constant combination, neither visible apart from the other and their interconnections in every case contingent. Violence may well be, as Ricoeur said, “the interruption of discourse,” but does it not also belong to its essence? “Discourse is always the interruption of violence,” but again does it not also belong to it? For Madison, “violence and discourse are mutually exclusive.” (PP, 90) This makes sense so long as we are speaking of philosophical abstractions, or of ethics, but when we are speaking of history, violence and discourse appear to be inseparable. It may be overstating it to say they are one, but where in history one finds the former one finds the latter. Perhaps it is Michel Foucault who has most effectively made this point. My question for Madison, then, is in what sense is history not pure contingency? It is not pure chance in the sense of randomness, but is it not a mistake to underestimate the role of fortune in history?

Madison has a point when he writes that “the most basic, *experiential* fact about human beings everywhere is that they are ‘speaking animals,’” free participants therefore in the conversational community. (PP, 90) The trouble is that there is another basic, experiential fact about human beings everywhere, and this is that they are violent animals, whose manner of participation tends on the whole to be self-serving and more than occasionally self-defeating. If this is too pessimistic, let us say that our discourse, like history itself, is highly repetitious and that the evidence for teleological progression in knowledge, or much of anything, is underwhelming.

A couple of sentences after the one just cited, Madison writes: “People from different backgrounds can relate to one another in, basically, one of two ways: either by the exercise of brute force or by specifically human means, by means, that is, of discourse, seeking to persuade rather than coerce.” (PP, 90) Again, this sounds like good ethics and bad history. Madison is no naive progressivist and well knows that history, as he puts it, “is a form of storytelling, a kind of fiction,” and that “history as a would-be science providing for human affairs the kind of cause-and-effect explanations and ‘necessary laws’ which were thought to be the glory of the natural sciences, history in this sense is finished.” (PP, 28) My question is how this is reconcilable with his more Hegelian view. Does Madison overestimate the causal efficacy of ideas when after stating that “human beings are...‘products’...of the very ideas they form of themselves” he favourably cites an assertion of Ludwig von Mises: “The history of mankind is the history of ideas. For it is ideas, theories and doctrines

that guide human action, determine the ultimate ends men aim at and the choice of means employed for the attainment of these ends.”⁸ Are ideas really the engine of history? If history can be said to have a driving force, I would submit that it has two: ideas and their seeming opposite, coercion. When I look at history, this is what I see—these two in constant combination, and always presided over by the Roman goddess Fortuna, who was often said to be blind. Again, I cannot prove this point or that contingency is all there is. What I can do is submit in evidence rather a great deal of recorded history, if not every page of it. It is not, on the whole, an inspiring picture, or it is inspiring and depressing in about equal measure, and good ideas have found favour about as often as they have been ignored, demolished, or forgotten. My last question for Madison, then, is how clear is the distinction between conversation and coercion? Are they, as Ricoeur, said, “the most fundamental opposites in human existence” or are they two aspects of the same phenomenon?

The importance of this line of questioning should not be overstated from the point of view of Madison’s overall philosophical project, in which the philosophy of history never emerges as a major theme. Madison’s contribution has placed him in the higher ranks of contemporary continental thought, and his writings fully warrant the attention they have received and, in my view, far more. *On Suffering* in particular is a reminder of what philosophy can still be in the modern world, which is the same pursuit and love of wisdom that it was for the Greeks.

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⁸ Madison, *The Political Economy*, 38.