REPLY TO MY FRIENDS

Gary B. Madison

I, Gary Madison, am not the person reading this paper (which, be assured, is by me). The real Gary Madison—to the degree that such an entity actually exists—is back in Hamilton wishing he could be with all of you today in Ottawa. Alas, that cannot be case, given the depredations of time, about which I have written in my latest book, On Suffering. Sic est vita, so is life, as the Romans used to say. But if the person who is reading this is not the real me, he is nevertheless real in his own right and is a real friend, most definitely not a “friend” in the virtual, 21st century, social media sense of the term. Moreover, all the speakers to whom I have the honor of responding are real friends—friends with whom I have shared (real) experiences over the last several decades. I am grateful to them all for agreeing to be on this panel that Felix so thoughtfully organized and for all the good (and also critical) things that they have had to say.

I am thankful in the first instance to Cal Schrag, a long-time fellow traveler on the via philosophiae and now doyen of Continental philosophy in America. Like me, Cal is getting on in years but is nevertheless also quite real, despite his also having to be only virtually present today. I am grateful for his gracious and extremely well-informed overview of my philosophical career ever since my first, youthful study of Merleau-Ponty (a book I wrote back in the 1960s when I was living in Paris and that, in its English translation, is still in print after all these years and for which, believe it or not, I am still receiving royalties). With his well-developed hermeneutical sense of things, Cal divides my career into three general phases which could be called the existential-phenomenological, the postmodern, and the social-political-economic.

Besides having always been committed, card-carrying existential phenomenologists, Cal and I were fellow combatants working in tandem to defend the cause of true philosophy against the negativism of the postmodernists who with their philosophical hammers set out to proclaim the end of just about everything: the end of man or the subject, the end of philosophy, universal reason, truth, and decidable meaning. What we shared throughout those many years was a desire to move beyond the relativistic and nihilistic tendencies of what came under the general heading of “postmodernism”—all
the while respecting what was positive or "liberating" about it, namely, its "deconstruction" of the metaphysical excesses so prevalent in much of traditional, objectivistic philosophy. What Cal and I became focused on in our critical debates with the postmodernists—which we always sought to conduct in a spirit of hermeneutical good-will—was (to allude to the title of a celebration of Cal's work held at Purdue in April of 2000), the task of philosophy after postmodernity. I have talked about this in my "Coping with Nietzsche's Legacy" (which seems to have taken on a life of its own on the Internet). Paul Fairfield has described this "task" very well in the Introduction to the Festschrift he edited in my honor that was published as a special issue of Symposium in 2004. For more on this subject, I suggest that you dig out your old copies of Symposium and see what Paul had to say.

What Cal sees as a third focus in my work was a continuation of my work in hermeneutics and was an attempt to work out an interpretive account of the social world. This was, as Cal points out, an attempt to rehabilitate the old idea of practical philosophy—as embodied for instance in the great tradition of classical rhetoric—and was guided throughout by a praxis-oriented, non-foundationalist, and properly ethical notion of reason that I called communicative rationality. This is the core notion of hermeneutical theory (and is quite different from what Habermas called such; the practical-hermeneutical notion of communicative rationality has nothing to do with hypothetical, counterfactual notions like "ideal speech situations"). It was, above all, an attempt to defend the greatest of earthy goods and the most fundamental principle of pure practical reason. By which I mean, of course, freedom. As I attempted to argue in a fully systematic way in my 1998 book, The Political Economy of Civil Society and Human Rights, no civil society, no liberal democracy, can be said fully to exist where individual agents are not endowed with the freedoms and rights appropriate to each of

---

1 M. J. Matustik and W. L. McBride, eds., Calvin O. Schrag and the Task of Philosophy After Postmodernity (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002).
the three major spheres or “orders” of human agency, \textit{i.e.}, the moral-cultural, the political, and the economic.

My writings in political economy and what I call hermeneutical liberalism grew out of my earlier work in basic economic theory and my attempt to show that economics is best viewed not as a positivistic science but as an interpretive science, a form of applied hermeneutics—an endeavor in which Gadamer lent me his wholehearted support. It is to these matters that Graeme Nicholson, my erstwhile colleague at the University of Toronto (I held appointments there in the graduate school for 10 years while I was teaching at McMaster), addresses himself. Given our different political orientations, it would not have been surprising if he did not give me too good a grade for my work in this area. Actually he was very generous in his remarks—displaying true hermeneutical good-will—but, even so, he raised some important questions which call for a response on my part. Perhaps the basic difference between Graeme and me is that he is more of a liberal in the modern sense of the term (as defined in his paper) whereas I am a liberal in the more traditional, classical sense of the term (in the sense, for instance, that my predecessor and homonym, James Madison, was a liberal). Take careful note, however! Liberalism as I understand it—and as it was defended by people like Adam Smith in the early days and Friedrich Hayek in our own times—has nothing to do with laissez-faireism or libertarianism. That should be perfectly obvious to anyone who has taken the time to read what these people actually wrote. Laissez-faireism is a form of ideological fundamentalism, the sort of thing that both Graeme and I detest (in my \textit{On Suffering}, I have mounted a sustained attack on the two kinds of fundamentalism Graeme talks about: religious fundamentalism and “parascientific” fundamentalism). The kind of economic liberalism I have defended has nothing “anti-government” about it. Quite the contrary. Both Smith and Hayek believed in strong—\textit{but limited}—government (no night-watchman, ruggedly individualistic, everyman-for-himself, minimal state here!). The State has a vital role to play in promoting what Gadamer called solidarity by, for instance, defending the basic rights of all citizens and by providing those public goods of an infrastructural nature that the private sector is incapable of providing on its own, but which are to everyone’s benefit, as well as a social safety-net for the less fortunate members of society (including in Hayek’s case universal health care).

The so-called capitalist system that emerged over the course of the last two centuries or so (but many of whose basic principles were laid out earlier in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century by the Spanish School of Salamanca) could not, in fact, exist outside of an overall political
system that both encourages it ("cultivates" it, as Hayek would say) and regulates it. As Adam Smith, a professor of moral philosophy, well knew, free market economics is, like all things human, prone to the worst forms of corruption (witness all the recent follies in the financial industry) and needs always to be hemmed in by the force of rational law, *i.e.*, a strict concern for individual rights and the common good (what Cicero called *aequitas* and *justitia*). Habermas notwithstanding, power is *always* unequal, which is precisely why it needs always to be tempered by the rule of law ("authority backed up by law," in Graeme’s words). Good-will, be it on a national or a global level, can flourish only when right reason—what Gadamer called the "communality of reason"—prevails.

The free market economy (the "system of natural liberty," as Smith called it) is what Alfred Schutz, the phenomenologist of the social world, would call an Ideal type. All really existing economies are of "mixed" sort. The pertinent question *practically* speaking, and one that I have sought to address in my writings, is: how much can the state intervene in the economy without becoming “socialist” and posing a serious threat to free enterprise and individual entrepreneurship—without, in other words, eviscerating the autonomous formations, *les forces vives*, of civil society? It is important in this regard always to remember that Liberalism and Socialism are both ideal types and that, as such and in accordance with the logic of systems, they are mutually exclusive; there can be only so much “mixing” before one of the types succumbs to the other. There are no ready-made, easy answers here, to how much “mixing” one can engage in; it is a matter of critical, interpretive judgment guided by sound, well thought-out principles—*phronesis, prudentia*. One thing is certain, however (at least as I see it), no one can be truly free who is not free morally-culturally, politically, and economically.

In his challenging presentation, Paul Fairfield picks up on the notions of "good will" and communicative rationality and does an excellent job of laying out my hermeneutical view on the matter which, as he recognizes, is quite different from the one put forward by Habermas (Peace be upon him). He very rightly points out how this way of viewing things involves an ethical (i.e., non-epistemological or non-metaphysical) view of reason. It is one that, as Graeme pointed out, has extensive normative implications, ones which, in the realm of human *praxis*, provide the conceptual underpinnings for a proper understanding of civil society and democracy.

---

(as well as the market economy). But what seems to rankle Paul a bit is some of the things I have said about history.

Unlike Stephen Pinker, an evolutionary materialist and a great believer in human perfectibility, I don’t know if, all things considered, humans are really all that much better now than they were in ancient times. Is hockey any less brutal a sport, basically, than were the old gladiatorial games? I’m not so sure about that, but one thing I do know is that the modern view of history as, in some sense or other, “progressive” or “teleological” is not a view one finds in antiquity; it owes everything to Christianity in general and St. Augustine in particular. The quintessentially modern view of history that one finds in the Enlightenment, in Marxism, and among the aficionados of technology is simply a secularization of the great change in outlook that Christianity first introduced into the world.

Of course, I fully agree with Paul, who prefers to align himself with the fatalistic pagans, that it would be folly to think that there are physics-like laws of historical development, that everything is always for the better, or that, as religious fundamentalists think, one can clearly discern the providential Hand of God at work in every little thing (this was, incidentally, Augustine’s view on the matter as well). I am in fact inclined to say that, phenomenally speaking at least, the history of the world is the repetitive history of human folly. Tanta stultitia mortalium est, as Seneca said in a favourite line of mine (I have it taped to my computer) and one that Shakespeare, being the accomplished plagiarizer that he was, appropriated as: “Lord, what fools these mortals be.”

So, Paul, when I speak of the essential (“clean,” as you say) difference between discourse and violence, I am speaking idealiter, speaking of what, as a matter of principle, is the case. In what is called the real world—i.e., that which lies outside of the field of ideality, the realm of clear and distinct ideas—everything is always, as I said of the economy, of a “mixed” sort (here, I too am a “realist”). But this is precisely why ideas are so crucially important in our lives as humans—feeble, fallible, and foolish creatures that we are. In the light of this not-so-ideal situation, Pascal declared: “Thought constitutes the greatness of man,” from which he concluded that striving to think well “is the basic principle of morality.” Ideas may, or may not, bring about real change in the world, but without ideas to guide us we

---

would be nothing more than hapless victims of blind fortune. Get your thinking straight, and then maybe, just maybe, you’ll be able to straighten out some of the mess in the world. This is not to subscribe to any “grand narrative” view of history; it simply amounts to saying that without the ability to work things out in the realm of ideas and then to use these ideas to alter the course of worldly events, everything would indeed be mere contingency, the same old damn thing endlessly repeating itself, which is to say, “a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.” That “postmodern,” nihilistic view of things is one that I, as a firm believer in the logos—and in the self-determining power of free-will—am not at all prepared to accept. I prefer to choose hope over resignation, meaning over meaninglessness, and life over death. I do not know if you are going to be satisfied with this, Paul, but it will have to do for now.

As my fellow hermeneuticist and philosophical companion-in-arms, Jean Grondin, realizes full well, I have always sought to remain faithful to what I learned from my venerable teachers, Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. I only wish that they were still alive so that I could send them a copy of my new book, On Suffering. I think they would approve of it and give me their blessing. It is (as I see it) the best book I have written. It represents, as Cal might say, a fourth period in my philosophical career. In it I return to my early existential concerns over what it means to be an actually existing individual confronted with the question of what it means to be (which never went away but only slipped into the background), and in it I have gathered up and incorporated just about all the important things I have learned over the course of the last half-century or so. It is, you might say, my ethical will and testament, a way of protecting myself from what Francis Bacon called the “deluge of time,” the primeval oceanic flood that overwhelms and obliterates all.

It is indeed, as Jean highlights in his very insightful paper, a very personal book, which is why, I gather, he entitled his paper “The Confessiones of Gary Brent Madison.” In it, I also had the temerity to speak of what most people would consider to be religious matters, something that Jean also does not hesitate to point out. I do believe that homo sapiens is also by nature homo religiosus. But fear not. I have not suddenly “got religion” and gone off the deep end. I am, and remain what I have always been, a philosopher through and through. Which is to say that I place my faith and trust in the powers of natural reason and cannot subscribe to anything that is not consonant

---

10 Francis Bacon, Advancement of Learning (New York: Random House, 2001), 77.
with reason, the *lumen naturale* that enlightens and makes intelligible the things of the world. Like all of the great philosophers of antiquity, it is reason (Lady Philosophy, as Boethius would say) that has guided me in my ever-ongoing attempt to make sense of things and to come to some understanding of what it means to be.

But what is reason? In this book I have sought, as I always have, to formulate a more capacious view of reason than the woefully short-sighted one that one increasingly finds just about everywhere one happens to look in our modern, technoscientific culture: reason as mere calculative, instrumental rationality. As I have learned from my study of classical rhetoric and the long tradition of *philosophia practica*, reason is much more than that. It is basically a matter of a certain kind of intellectual *praxis*, of holding oneself open to the immense variety of lived experience, combined with a willingness to engage with others in an honest attempt to arrive at the truth of things (“communicative rationality”). And here I come to Jean’s main criticism: my aversion to “metaphysics,” which I tend to equate with idle, groundless speculation. That’s just the phenomenologist in me. Jean has a valid point though: I am perhaps being unfair in denigrating metaphysics in this way. But then, as he says, our *différend* on this issue may really be no more than a *querelle de mots*. And maybe he’s right: maybe I am, after all, a metaphysician à mon insu. It would take what Montaigne called “*une longue interrogation*” to sort this all out. It is the subject for much further discussion—if not in this life, then, recalling what Socrates said on his deathbed and speaking (for now, at least) pre-posthumously, in the life of the world to come.

Back in the 1980s, out of desperation over the meager pickings in Continental philosophy at the annual CPA meetings, some of my graduate students and I decided to found a new society dedicated to Continental philosophy and which, for lack of any better suggestion, we called the CSH, the Canadian Society for Hermeneutics and Postmodern Thought. Not all that great a title, perhaps, but the words “hermeneutics” and “postmodern” did have the merit back then of attracting media people to our sessions who were intrigued by these new-fangled terms and had lots of fun trying to explain to the public in newspaper articles and on TV what this weird-sounding stuff was all about. I could not have foreseen back then how the society would grow and thrive and spawn a first-rate journal and eventually become the more prudently named Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy. I may now be a professor emeritus, but, as Cal points out, to be emeritus is not the same thing as to be dead. Although I have had to abandon the *vita activa*, I now live fully and quite happily in what Husserl called the *Unendlichkeit* of the *transcendentales Lebens*,

---

Reply to My Friends 165
the *vita contemplativa*, which, as Aristotle said, is that form of life that is closest to the divine (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b30). And from my study here in Hamilton—where, like Montaigne in the splendid isolation of his stone tower out in the French provinces, I live in daily communion with the great thinkers of the past—I thank you all for participating in this retrospective on my life’s work. *Cursum perficio*. Thank you, all of you, very much.

Les Érables  
Sept.–Aug., 2012