In considering the alleged — and, as I happen to believe, real — revival of practical philosophy, it seems to me very appropriate to spend some time reflecting on the question, "To what good?" Any one of the following might be thought to qualify as an exercise in practical philosophy: a non-abstract, experienced-based systematic analysis of (a) virtues and vices (the Aristotelean tradition), or (b) authenticity and bad faith (the existentialist tradition), or (c) alienation and community (the Hegelian-Marxist tradition), and there are no doubt many other possible alternatives. In any case, the exercise is at first, necessarily, the practical activity of only a single individual, the analyst (or, in the still rare case of a joint effort, the analysts). There are, of course, familiar ways of multiplying this activity of practical reasoning: notably, by delivering a more or less formal lecture about it, or by writing about it. The original analyst's listeners and/or readers will presumably never exactly repeat his or her original activity; they may, in their own thinking, add to it, probably more often reconstruct a partly inaccurate and less detailed version of it, and sometimes react to it in such a way as to produce a very different analytic outcome. This is what all of us expect, optimally, when we publicly engage in the activity of philosophizing, whether as practical philosophers or in some purely theoretical area of the discipline. In this admittedly minimal sense the much-discussed union of theory and practice, said to be so difficult to attain, is constantly being achieved — if we take seriously Althusser's idea of theoretical practice.

It is widely believed, however, that the practical philosopher is by definition committed to more ambitious expectations if he or she is to be able validly to claim success. In short, the practical philosopher is ordinarily expected to want to exert some effect — to have an influence or an impact, as we say — on the social world. In Western thought, this expectation goes back at least as far as Plato's advocacy of philosopher-kings in the Republic. It is true, as we all know, that Plato's own attempt at influencing government policy through his pupil in Syracuse was, let us say, counterproductive, but it is also true that he was working under very imperfect conditions there. At any rate, it is possible to distinguish, as commentators frequently have done, between the practical effects of the
political activities of a person who is a practical philosopher, on the one hand, and the putative practical relevance of the tenets of his or her practical philosophy, on the other. Since Plato, the ideal of philosopher-kings has more frequently been ridiculed than applauded, I would imagine, but this notion has nevertheless become deeply engrained in our collective consciousness.

Aristotle, the classical philosopher whose name is usually most closely linked with the concept of “practical philosophy”, is a most interesting case. It is very difficult to be certain, from his writings, just what sort of an impact he hoped or expected to have on his society and on other societies in history, particularly since he held history itself in such low esteem. It would be rather ridiculous at this point, I think, to try to argue that Alexander’s conquests either would not have occurred at all or would have been somewhat different — more barbaric, perhaps — had it not been for Aristotle’s early tutelage, and Aristotle’s later status as a resident alien in Athens prevented him from engaging in the activities of citizenship there. Towards the end of his life, as we know, he was forced to flee because of his being identified with the Macedonian party. When we turn to Aristotle’s political theory proper, we find it difficult clearly to state, in a sentence or two, just what his political ideal was; that is because of the very important and useful distinctions that he makes among the ideal best, the average best, the best relative to various circumstances, and the best under various non-ideal constraints. His own account of the ideal best state at the end of the Politics as we have it is incomplete and, even in the parts that survive, disappointing when compared with many other parts of that work. Few if any other philosophers have in fact influenced as many later thinkers as he has, but precisely what he favored in socio-political practice remains open to the most diverse interpretations and uses — from those of Aquinas to those of Hegel to those of Marx and beyond.

Undoubtedly the most famous modern formulation of the expectation that practical philosophy ought to have practical relevance is the epigram that was eventually chosen as the epitaph for Marx’s grave: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it.” It can serve as the basic reference-point for the three central questions that I wish to ask in this paper: first, in what sense or senses, if any, is the point, in fact, to change the world?; second, have some past and/or present thinkers been successful in doing so?; third, should some future thinkers continue to try to do so?

I. What Is the Point?

Marx’s short, innocent-looking sentence is redolent of ambiguities, both external and internal to the sentence itself. First of all, there are the circumstances of its writing. Marx composed it, the last of his eleven pithy Theses on Feuerbach, as they have come to be called, at a time of intellectual and personal transition in his life. He had been greatly impressed by Feuerbach’s materialist critique of Hegel, but he now saw the inadequacy of Feuerbach’s mechanistic type of materialism, as well, in view of its passive model of human action. These Theses were presumably dashed off, in a manner rather typical of much of Marx’s early writing, and stashed
away in some pile of notes, from which they were rescued by Engels after Marx's death. Engels found it useful to append them to an essay that he wrote about the intellectual evolution of his and Marx's generation and that he entitled "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy." So there is a strong presumption that Marx himself, the writer of the sentence, never expected it to be disseminated, much less to serve as his epitaph. But in many quarters today, of course, it is considered very naive to waste much time in considering the author's intention when examining a text.

Internally considered, the sentence — really, two thoughts joined by a comma in German, a semi-colon in English — is really very puzzling. The first part ("Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert") is a claim about the history of philosophy. It does not say, when taken literally, that philosophy as world interpretation is a wrongheaded enterprise; rather, it implies, with the word, "only" (nur), that it is an inferior or less valuable one, perhaps akin to the child's construction of sand-castles by the seashore. By comparison, the activity of changing the world is "the point", "where it's at". (Es kommt drauf an, sie zu verändern.) I have here descended to slang, in order to emphasize the extent to which Marx's own language is informal and he is resorting at this point to sloganizing. (It must always be remembered, of course, that he himself did not plan to publish these Theses, so that the blame for erecting a slogan into a dogma must be laid at others' doorsteps.)

Now, any judgment as to the inferiority of world-interpreting or, to use my seeming reductio example, sand castle-building, must be based on a prior set of assumed value standards. In fact, play can be defended as a valuable and even a necessary human activity, and building sand castles can become a very intricate form of play, even if its products are, almost by definition, highly ephemeral. I would without hesitation rank the building of sand castles along the shores of Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam as a much more desirable activity than the enormous military construction that was undertaken there by the United States government a decade and a half ago — although it might take some time for me to elaborate on my reasons for saying this if I were challenged to do so. So to apply my analogy back to Marx's sentence, it is by no means self-evident that "mere" world-interpretation is necessarily inferior to world-change. In fact, taken literally as a universal statement, it seems almost self-evidently false. What Marx meant, although he did not say so here, was that the point is to change the world in a certain way or ways, not in any possible way. For instance, while destroying most of the world's civilizations and peoples through nuclear warfare would indeed constitute a most dramatic world-change, I cannot conceive of Marx's preferring that outcome to the continued proliferation of philosophical world-interpretations in an otherwise unchanged world. But even such a preference needs, if challenged by, let us say, a systematic nihilist of a certain type, to be defended with rational arguments in favor of certain value standards.

Next, let us focus on the words, "the point is" (es kommt drauf an). Commentators have seen in this Marxian imperative a frontal assault on the previous mainstream tradition according to which theory has priority over practice and, hence, theoretical over practical reasoning. They will point out that Hegel, for instance, saw philosophy's task as one of com-
prehension and of reconciliation to actuality, and nothing more. Marx conceived his task in a diametrically opposite way. How is one to adjudicate between them, or indeed can adjudication even be attempted?

One popular gloss on the meaning of Marx's point about "the point" here is to maintain that Marx is hereby signaling his departure from the activity of philosophy as such — that he is, in effect, turning in his philosopher's badge. This interpretation is reinforced by a few autobiographical sentences written for publication by Marx some years later in his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a passage which has been made to do far more work than it merits as an interpretive scheme for Marx's entire system of thought. I believe that this way of understanding what Marx is saying in the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach is defective by virtue of making everything turn on a word, the word "philosophy" or "philosophers." What Marx is rejecting when he announces what "the point" is here is a certain approach to philosophizing, namely, the predominantly contemplative approach which prevailed in the universities of his youth. But much of what he went on to do throughout the remainder of his career, as he presumably tried to follow his own advice by attempting to change the world, was by most definitions philosophical in inspiration and even, in large measure, in basic concept, as I have tried to show elsewhere. This is so whether one chooses to use the word, "philosophy", to categorize it or not.

This still leaves unresolved the question as to why (or, indeed, whether) we should regard Marx's activity, world-changing, as superior to the interpretive activity of other philosophers. There was no doubt in Marx's mind, as his entire career shows, that a good deal of the latter, interpretation, must in some sense precede the former — that is, that there must be a prior, informed appraisal of what it is that is to be changed. Virtually all of the book, *Capital*, for example, is an exercise in such appraisal. If the publication and distribution of *Capital* can indeed be said to have effected some change in the world — the sort of claim with which I shall be dealing in the next section of this paper — therefore, reasons for its putative success must in part be attributable to Marx's interpretive activity. What these reflections suggest is that the two types of activities, world-interpretation and world-changing, are not so entirely distinct as Marx's own expression of their apparent difference, further exaggerated as it becomes, in my opinion, in the English translation, might lead us to believe.

To the extent to which the two types of activities can be at least partly distinguished, in any case, I remain dubious about the possibility of always attaching a higher priority to the world-changing type. Indeed, of course, Marx himself is logically committed to rejecting the claim that world-changing is always superior; it — at least, world-changing of a genuinely revolutionary sort — would not be so in the context of a truly socialist society, for example, and it is this reflection that has given rise to quasi-utopian speculations, somewhat more abundant a few years ago than now within certain "unorthodox" Marxist circles, about a radically revised role for philosophy in such a society. It seems to me that there must always be a decision, on the part of an actual practical philosopher, as to whether attempting to change the world, his or her social world, makes sense at that time and in that place. This commonsensical conclu-
sion seems to me to be very much in the spirit of Marx, but contrary to the anti-philosophical and sometimes even genuinely anti-intellectual tone that has on occasion been read into the sentence to which I have been devoting so much time here. The decision, in short, must be a strategic — i.e., a practical — one based on the philosopher’s experience and perception of extant circumstances. This brings me to my second original question: How successful have philosophers been in their strategic judgments?

II. The Philosophers’ Record of Success

To head my discussion of my second topic in this way underlines even further, I suppose, my divergence from Marx’s Eleventh Thesis, at least as it has been, if one will pardon the expression, interpreted. The work of philosophers often has had, it seems to me, world-changing as its purpose, even if not always a fully conscious purpose. Descartes, for example, by the paradigms both of method and of metaphysics that he developed, has indirectly wrought enormous changes in the world ever since his time. But I am interested in considering the “records” of some of those thinkers whose avowed intentions were and are practical, in the sense that I discussed at the beginning. The philosophers I have chosen are Hobbes, Sartre, and, of course, Marx himself. I shall also speculate briefly about the future fates of three of our contemporaries, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Alisdair MacIntyre.

A preliminary remark may be in order about my choice of the word, “strategy”, to characterize these philosophers’ judgments about bridging the gap between theory and practice. Habermas would make a distinction between communicative activity and strategic action, treating the former as pure, the latter as instrumental or manipulative. I have doubts about the real possibility and the political relevance of Habermas’ communicative ideal, doubts on which it would be out of place to elaborate here, but let it suffice for me to take note of his likely objection to my talk of philosophers’ “strategies”, and of my acceptance, on the contrary, of the idea that some strategic manipulation is impossible to avoid when practical philosophers set out to influence history.

My first case, Hobbes, writes urgently, imploringly, at several points in the *Leviathan* about the desirability of implementing the practical implications of his theories. Make no mistake about it, he was an intellectual strategist, as his dedicatory letter to Mr. Francis Godolphin clearly shows. He believes that, correctly implemented, his supposedly scientific rules of commonwealth will preserve a state in perpetuity from the danger of internal subversion. How has his thought been received?

Charles II tolerated Hobbes during the latter’s later years, but still Hobbes was generally considered an undesirable person to whom to claim intellectual adherence. Certainly no state of which I have ever heard has consciously organized itself on a Hobbesian model, and the claim one occasionally hears to the effect that modern so-called totalitarian states are essentially Hobbesian is based, I think, on fundamental misunderstandings of both points of reference, Hobbes and contemporary states. (Hobbes, for one thing, seemed to assume that there would be many more areas of human behavior in which the law would not intervene than is the case in
the post-modern world.) In short, the rulers of the world have never followed Hobbes’ dicta, and I am sure that he would say that the results of this disregard have been predictable.

At the same time, however, Hobbes’ thought is often described, and rightly so, as being at the origin of modern liberalism. The principal reason for this, of course, is his conception of human beings as atomic units, whose entry into society is in some sense the product of a voluntary choice; this conception was used by Locke and others to support rules of a far more permissive sort than those inferred by Hobbes. In addition, Hobbes’ famous picture of the state of nature is constantly invoked, sometimes with approval and sometimes with disapproval, to support all sorts of frequently incompatible claims about the social world.

So Hobbes has had his effect, but not at all, it seems to me, of the sort that he would have wanted. Despite all the spate of detailed, rather respectful scholarship that has recently been produced concerning his work, no contemporary reader, I suspect, completely accepts either his main behavioral premises or his geometric method, much less his conclusions. Now, one possible interpretation of what happened with Hobbes is the extreme superstructural thesis, which would maintain that his ideas, like those of other philosophers, simply reflected, albeit confusedly and with traces of other influences, the interest of a class, in this case the rising bourgeoisie, and that it is therefore no surprise that what was most fully retained of his thought, the ontological individualism, was what turned out most clearly to foster those interests. But while there is considerable truth in this interpretation, there are some very implausible aspects to it, notably the implication that some rather mysterious and unspecified causality was directed at Hobbes’ pen from and by certain historical trends of his day. Hobbes was more complex and more unique than this account allows. We cannot regard him as simply a puppet controlled by forces that he in no way comprehended.

In this case, though, Hobbes must certainly be said to have failed according to his own intentions. The fact that this gladdens many hearts is beside the point for present purposes. It is not that Hobbes’ practical schemes were tried and found wanting, or that they were tried, but only partially and imperfectly; like the schemes of many other practical philosophers before and since, his were virtually never even taken seriously.

This is surely not so with my second case, Karl Marx. If one accepts my view, previously mentioned, that he remained a philosopher, to all intents and purposes, throughout his life, then he can be seen as the practical philosopher par excellence. Was he successful in the practical implementation of the goals that he theoretically elaborated?

What a question to ask today. How much emotion it invokes in people throughout the world, even in millions who have never read more than paragraph of Marx’s own writings. The second (or perhaps even, if we listen to our current national administration, the first) most powerful nation, militarily speaking, in the world officially claims to be organized along Marxist lines, as do a number of the governments of its client states. Seemingly, then, an incredible contrast with the case of Hobbes.

But first appearances are not, of course, to be trusted. Increasingly, the adjective, “Marxist-Leninist”, is used instead of “Marxist” to categorize the official theory of the governments of which I have spoken. (And
indeed, even the Reagan Administration occasionally now refers to “Marxist-Leninist” revolutionary movements in Latin America.) This strongly implies what is the case, namely, that what is now the official practical philosophy of these governments and movements is something other than the pure philosophy of Marx — a distortion or a creative reinterpretation, as one pleases.

Meanwhile, there is a strong and widespread feeling of unease, to put it mildly, about the accomplishments of the Marxist-Leninist regimes themselves. One may always maintain, up to an indefinite point, that such widespread dissatisfaction is due to a certain lack of understanding of what is truly practically desirable, on the parts of individuals subject to these regimes and of external observers alike. But eventually, in practical philosophy, this appeal to, so to speak, an esoteric wisdom possessed only by a few becomes shopworn and simply implausible; it becomes so even when made by persons who give clear evidence of exhibiting a high degree of intellectual virtue, as Aristotle would call it (many of the more orthodox followers of the late Leo Strauss come to my mind as examples of this), but the sense of implausibility is heightened when so many of the alleged illuminati are apparatchiki of only mediocre intelligence. So, assuming that one shares this deep dissatisfaction with the current Marxist - Leninist regimes, not only as they are now constituted but also in terms of the future directions that they seem to be taking, one can choose either of two positions with respect to the implications of these political realities for the question as to Marx’s success as a practical philosopher: either the regimes and movements in question are aberrations, that is, are not (perhaps never were, but in any case are not now) implementations of Marx’s theories — in which case Marx must ultimately be regarded as having failed in somewhat the same way as Hobbes failed, though perhaps not as completely — or the regimes do in fact embody a significant portion of Marxian ideas. In the latter case, there is failure of another kind, traceable to the inner structure of Marx’s thought itself.

It is this latter perception that has grown noticeably in recent years among many in both West and East who formerly thought of themselves as being in some sense Marxists, so that one hears regularly of a “crisis of Marxism”. In these matters, it is more difficult to decide than it is in the case of an individual when the life crisis is past and death has occurred, although the technological distinction between brain death and the cessation of other life functions, whereby the former may sometimes occur long before the latter, may be helpful as an analogy. (Of course, the possibility, usually considered excluded in the case of a human being, of a practical philosophy’s rebirth cannot be discounted as long as the texts survive.) But the general trend towards very severe criticism of Marx, if not for his positive insights (alienation, ideology, perhaps a few others) then at least for his allegedly egregious lacunae and general shortsightedness, has become overwhelming even among many who once considered themselves Marxists (and perhaps in some cases still do). Against this trend, I would like to try to absolve Marx of much of the guilt which is now attributed to him, by maintaining, as I always have, that his chief value consists in his ability as a critic of existing states of affairs, rather than as either a prophet of the future or even a counselor of what is to be done. But I am aware that this approach has the para-
doxical effect of making Marx something less, if one may put it this way, of a practical philosopher than, say, the great classical prototype, Aristotle. For Marx's chief value as a practical philosopher can then be said to consist in his interpretation of current practices rather than in any recommendations of his, like those implicit in Aristotle's delineations of the virtues, for future practice. Aristotle did not perhaps expect to "change the world" very much (in any event, his strong stress on the necessity of habituation from childhood shows why he could hardly have held any such expectations very strongly), but Marx, who surely did, was unjustified at least in thinking that, according to his own theoretical insights, he could determine the direction of whatever changes the dissemination of his criticisms might bring about in the world's course.

I would like to turn now to my twentieth-century cases, Sartre, Rawls, Habermas, and Maclntyre. In each of the last three cases I wish only to make a few remarks. Sartre, recently deceased and hence still a contemporary of ours, is a most interesting case because of his obvious eagerness to exert practical influence, at least during the entire post-War period. Like Marx, he worked as an editor and gave many speeches to non-academic gatherings, although it is true that Sartre's skepticism about commitment to institutionalized groups prevented him from being as active a member of any party as Marx was throughout most of his adult life.

First, was Sartre a practical philosopher? MacIntyre sees him as epitomizing the rejection of ongoing practices (Sartre's negative description of inauthenticity, self-deception, role-playing) that typifies modernity, which MacIntyre deplores in the domain of ethics. Sartre never published his promised book on ethics, although a surviving unfinished manuscript on the topic has now appeared, and although the Critique of Dialectical Reason has been seen by some as a substitute for such a book. Nevertheless, in intention Sartre was certainly a practical philosopher. His principal philosophical interest was always human reality in its practical aspects, and his aim, as shown by his almost innumerable journalistic endeavors (on the Korean War, on Stalinism, on Cuba, etc.) and public stands on issues (on Algeria, on Vietnam, on the Nobel Prize, etc.), was to exert influence on a certain public.

And so he did. But exactly what was that influence? That is hard to say. In Hobbes' case, there was no serious question of a basic change in the intellectual orientation of his practical philosophy from the beginning to the end of his late-starting career. There is more of a question of change between the so-called early and late Marx, but I regard it as a relatively easy matter, especially with the aid of the Grundrisse of his middle period, to show a basic continuity of practical concerns from the beginning to the end of his career. In Sartre's case, on the other hand, we are confronted with the philosopher's own claims that he had changed, that he was sometimes astonished to read what he had written earlier (e.g., concerning the omnipotence of human freedom), and that the extreme skepticism and doubt which he had preached with a quasi-religious fervor in his earlier years had given way to a different orientation.

Elsewhere, I have argued in favor of an essential continuity, at the ontological level as well as at the levels of methodology and of (some) intellectual interests, between the Sartre of the earlier Being and Nothingness and the Sartre of the later Critique of Dialectical Reason. A
footnote in the latter work helps establish that continuity, and there are
numerous other pieces of evidence for it. Moreover, Sartre himself, in his
last major philosophical work, The Family Idiot, makes ready use of con­
cepts and terminology from all of his earlier philosophical periods, and in
the super-abundant proliferation of published interviews from the last
years of his life there is some approving reference even to his earliest
work, especially to his studies of the imagination, as well as further ef­
forts at asserting a distance from that work. Nevertheless, when one ex­
amines the long course of Sartre’s thought from beginning to end from
the perspective of his practical philosophical “message”, if one can ex­
press it that way, an impression, not only of considerable change, but per­
haps even of confusion, emerges.

To articulate that confusion is to state the obvious in terms of Sartre’s
career. In Being and Nothingness, he was “the elect of doubt”, who inti­
mated the possibility of developing an ethic of salvation, of authenticity,
without actually doing so, and who could write, in words that even Simone
de Beauvoir lamented a few years later, that man was a useless passion
and that from the standpoint of achieving or failing to achieve a certain
lucidity about one’s existence there was no difference between the bar­
room habitué and a ruler of a nation. During the postwar years, on the
other hand, Sartre stressed political commitment, advocating a difficult
course of solidarity with, but not adherence to, the Communist Party.
Later, his pessimism about the possibility of such collaboration increased
dramatically as a result of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, but at the
same time he was working to complete the Critique of Dialectical Reason,
his great effort at effecting a kind of synthesis between existentialism
and Marxism. Finally, in interviews, he concluded that he had never been
a Marxist, had always been what we would call a left-wing libertarian
and perhaps an anarchist at heart. Moreover, suggests Herbert Spiegel­
berg in a study of published fragments from a new effort at which Sartre
had been working with Benny Lévy during his last days, Sartre was be­
ing, at the time of his death, to discern some possibilities for genuine
solidarity and love, phenomena that his earlier work had always treated
as ephemeral, quasi-illusionary, and in any case deeply suspect.

So what can be said about Sartre’s impact on history in light of all of
this? He was an important figure of the middle of our century, to be sure.
But by 1968, the time of the French student revolt, he was already con­sidered dépasse by many of the younger generation, and he touchingly
expressed his eagerness to learn from them. Now, even if we may feel, as
I do, that his writings have great power and insight, and even though the
Sartre industry — I write not contemptuously, but simply objectively, and
indeed as someone who has a part in it — is exhibiting one of its histor­
ically highest ratios of productivity, there is, I think, a general sense that
he reflects earlier parts of our century, particularly the quarter-century
after the Second World War, more than the present. A Sartre revival is
possible — even, I would say, probable, at least in academic circles — at
a later time, but I think it highly unlikely, for the reasons that I have now
given, that his name will ever be invoked to deal with the problems of the
twenty-first century in the way in which Marx’s used to be for those of
the twentieth.

So Sartre, too, must be regarded as a sort of failure, though a different
sort again. He himself saw this very well, with perhaps less deep regret than Marx, for instance, might have felt if apprised of his future fate. In his autobiography, Sartre characterized the "fundamental project" of his career as writing, the universe of words having once appeared more real to him than the universe of solid objects, and he indicated that this illusion, along with many accompanying illusions, had by then been completely shattered. But the project itself had survived — an anti-Sartrean proof by Sartre himself, perhaps, of Aristotle’s notion of habituation.

In any case, it is Sartre himself, who, far better than most philosophers, has provided crucial insights into the ambiguities of the words, "success" and "failure", at the levels of both individual and collective action. In however exaggerated and at times unfortunate a language, he showed, in *Being and Nothingness*, the impossibility of our ever fixing the outcomes of our practical projects in permanent, ontological concrete, as it were — the impossibility of ever transforming our free actions into parts of being-in-itself while still keeping them free. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* he analyzed, often with the aid of actual examples (for example, the role played by the centuries-long intentional deforestation of the banks of the Yangtse River in the frequent floods which devastate that area), the notion of counter-finality in history. True, this had already been examined brilliantly by Hegel in his *Philosophy of History*, but there the idealist baggage of *Geist* that is epitomized in the famous expression, "the cunning of reason", introduces an obscurantist note into the discussion. In the later, more political, Sartre, the element of triumphal eschatological certainty that characterized the spirit, if less often the letter, of Marx’s thought and that played so important a role in informing many of the latter’s followers has disappeared entirely. But if history is always to be remade, then nothing can be said with finality, either, about the impact of practical philosophers, or of any particular practical philosopher, on history.

This brings me to the practical philosophers of the present day, whose moment of opportunity to influence history is not yet past. If what I have just said about the essential uncertainty of impact is valid, then I should probably not feel guilty about speculating, at least briefly, on the fates of their ideas. I have somewhat arbitrarily selected three of them to mention here, and I shall devote only a brief paragraph to each: John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Alisdair MacIntyre.

Of the three, Rawls is probably the best-known among non-philosophers, particularly among political scientists and economists, and his work is still widely discussed and in some places (Italy, I have been told, is one such place) is just being “discovered” by the broad academic public. A *Theory of Justice* is a very abstract work, to be sure (there is no real original position in history, as Rawls would be the very first to insist), and yet there can be no doubt that it encapsulates, with quasi-mathematical precision, a coherent set of high social aspirations typical of Western, especially American, left-liberalism in its more self-confident period of a decade or two ago. In other words, whether one accepts my labels or not, Rawls’ theory does not succeed in capturing the normative universality of time and place to which it aspires. It is a very useful, often graceful and attractive, record of some of the dominant social attitudes of a certain period in our civilization, one from which I think we have already in large
measure emerged, and it will be read as such in the future.

Habermas has made, and is still making, his mark among sociologists and other social scientists, in part by entering into scholarly dialogue with a number of them. His own attitude towards the putative *desideratum* of influencing practice, which I began this paper by discussing, is extremely ambiguous: on the one hand, he has stressed the inevitable practical side of all theoretical inquiry and the consequent reciprocal influence of such inquiry on human social action, especially in his earlier work (*Erkenntnis und Interesse, Theorie und Praxis*), and he has been strongly identified with a certain leftist set of political attitudes and practices particularly by his conservative critics in Germany; but on the other hand, the major part of his work seems to most readers highly abstract (when it is not more strictly historical scholarship, and sometimes when it is) rather than concretely current, and he himself has publicly expressed disinterest in involvement in ongoing political issues. Of course, "practice" in the sense in which one speaks of "practical philosophy" means something much more than just current events, and the type of reputation that Habermas enjoys in some circles testifies to the fact that others find his work to be of much more than merely academic interest. His project is nothing less than to delineate the principal characteristics of the modern, or more correctly post-modern, world, and to the extent to which he succeeds he may indeed have a significant influence on its subsequent development. But I remain highly skeptical about this possibility.

Alisdair MacIntyre's recent book, *After Virtue*, has attracted a certain amount of attention in this country as an interesting new contribution to practical philosophy, a notoriety that goes well beyond academic philosophy.*¹⁴* MacIntyre's criticisms of the kind of analytic turn taken by the sub-discipline of ethics in recent centuries, and of the corresponding (but surely one cannot say "resulting") disintegration of all older notions of "virtue" in Western culture, are most astute. But what sorts of effects on practice can he hope to have? MacIntyre's pessimism, with which even Hobbes' thought stands in sharpest contrast, makes him unique among the practical philosophers to whom I have referred. An excerpt from the already-famous final paragraph of his book makes this clear:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope.¹⁵

This is a very hopeless hope indeed. MacIntyre is at the antipodes to the highly optimistic Marx, many of whose critical insights he nevertheless shares. Just because he is so extremely pessimistic, I do not expect MacIntyre's influence on practice to be very great, either. But neither, of course, does he.

The overall "record", then, of these selected and somewhat representative thinkers is not such as to encourage belief that, whether or not "the point" really is to change the world, practical philosophers have been very effective strategists in attempting to do so. (I grant that I could have chosen a few more apparently successful cases — that of John Stuart Mill springs to mind, for example, although Marx thought of him as more of
a watchdog for the established order than a would-be world-changer — but I do not believe that such cases would be sufficient to offset the predominant impression that I have drawn.) What, then, is to be done? Should practical philosophers give up trying to have an effect, or should they adopt new strategies? Or is it perhaps the expectations that I enunciated at the beginning that need to be reexamined?

Conclusion: In Solidarity with Sisyphus

If the principal point of one’s activity is construed to be the changing of the world as quickly and as thoroughly as possible, then clearly philosophical activity, even of Marx’s or Sartre’s “engaged” type, is by no means the most promising route to take. The popular journalist, such as William Randolph Hearst, has a higher expectation, for example; the politician who plays by the existing constitutional and diplomatic rules has a still higher one; highest of all is the chance of the demagogue or wielder of physical force (assassin, military strongman) who violates those rules. However, an evaluation of the records of historical representatives of these groups would hardly reveal a higher rate of “success”, in whichever of several ways it might be measured, than did my evaluation of selected practical philosophers; on the contrary.

All activists — including, I think it could be demonstrated, all active practical philosophers (including even apparent exceptions such as Hegel, who advocated intellectual reconciliation with actuality) — have by definition believed that the world stands in need of change, in the sense of falling short of some imagined perfect, or at least less imperfect, state; it still does. The philosopher’s way of attempting to implement this belief is to undertake rigorous, more or less systematic examination of the conditions of human practice — not merely with a view to enumerating what those conditions are at a certain time and place, or have been at all known times and places up to the present, but also with a view to envisaging possible conditions for the future — e.g., what obstacles a truly great-souled individual would have to overcome, or what demeaning elements of the existing system of commodity exchange might be eliminable. To be sure, not all those who are generally considered practical philosophers would select my account of their function, what might be called the systematic, reasoned expansion of the domain of practical possibility, as their own preferred description; nevertheless, it seems to me a useful and historically valid one. Practical philosophers have of course always differed among themselves as to which possibilities seemed most worthy of implementation; there should be no surprise about this, nor about the fact that each one has chosen to stress those possibilities that have appeared most attractive to him or her. They never have and never will be able, without abandoning their roles as philosophers, to enforce acceptance of a particular set of behaviors, but that should never have been expected.

However one wishes to characterize various past times, the contemporary world, at any rate, is one in which enormously powerful forces make thinking about practical alternatives, particularly alternative social structures, very, very difficult. It is the world of, to use the apt German title of an early collection of Leszek Kolakowski’s essays, Der Mensch ohne Alternative. It is the world of what Herbert Marcuse’s book, the
temporary — but only very temporary — success of some of whose ideas seemed to believe its claims, encapsulated as “one-dimensional man”. It is against the background of these trends, and despite the assurance, borne of all the historical experience of which I have recalled only a few moments, that no clear-cut success and probably much failure will be the lot of those who undertake to participate in it, that the current revival of practical philosophy is taking place and deserves to be encouraged. We may lament, as I have here, the shortcomings of its practitioners, but their very existence raises doubts, it seems to me, as to whether we are yet in “the new dark ages” of which MacIntyre has written. Perhaps — but this is only a possibility — we need not enter them at all.

So despite its impotence, the ever renewed demonstration of which resembles the experience of the mythical Sisyphus as he reaches the top of the hill, the practice of practical philosophy richly merits society’s applause and support. To assert this is by no means incompatible with the bemused awareness of that impotence that is reflected in similar remarks made by practical philosophers throughout the ages, from Aristotle’s remark that he had fled possible persecution in order to avoid letting Athens sin twice against philosophy, to Sartre’s comment in The Words:

“I still write. What else is there to do?
“Nulla dies sine linea.
“It’s my custom and besides it’s my profession. For a long time I took my pen to be a sword; at present, I am aware of our impotence. No matter: I make, I shall make books; it is necessary; it is of service nevertheless. Culture saves nothing and no one, it does not justify. But it is a product of man; he projects himself in it, recognizes himself in it; alone, this critical mirror offers him his own image.”

*This paper was presented in the spring of 1983 at Duquesne University’s symposium on The Revival of Practical Philosophy.

NOTES


2. See, for example, Nathan Rotenstreich, Basic Problems of Marx’s Philosophy (Indianapolis, etc., Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 92-93.


6. The usual French translation of Marx's words, "es kommt drauf an", is "il s' agit maintenant de". (The force of the "drauf", which seems to imply something like "next" and hence a certain continuity between the activity of interpretation and that of changing, is entirely lost in the standard English version.) But it would also be permissible to translate the idiomatic German expression into a dramatic French as "il s' agit maintenant de savoir de", which would very well illuminate the necessary bridge between the allegedly distinctive theoretical and practical enterprises.

7. "But yet, methinks, the endeavour to advance the civil power, should not be by the civil power condemned." — Leviathan, Oakeshott ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), p. 2, underlining mine.

8. I am indebted to Svetozar Stojanović for his as yet unpublished paper, "Capitalism, Etatism, and Ideology", delivered at the seminar on "Social Science and Philosophy" at the Inter-University Centre, Dubrovnik, March 30, 1983, as the chief inspiration for these observations. In addition, a perusal of recent issues of the journal, Telos, will provide abundant confirmation of them.


10. Even Leo Strauss, whose study places a great deal of emphasis on differences, between Hobbes' earlier and later thought (e.g., the shift from aristocratic to bourgeois ideals), concludes that there was an underlying continuity of moral attitude. See his The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, tr. E.M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 170.


17. The same metaphor was, of course, used years ago by Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, tr. J. O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 88-91, to characterize his notion of "the absurd man". But one need not subscribe to Camus' philosophy of the absurd in order to accept the relevance of the metaphor for the situation of the practical philosopher.