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**Raymond Geuss: Outside Ethics**

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## Introduction

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MOST OF THE FOLLOWING essays are *pièces d'occasion*, responses to concrete invitations to address a particular topic in a specific forum, and my primary hope is that as many of them as possible will be able to stand on their own as illuminating contributions to the understanding of whatever particular topic or topics each treats. However, it is, I hope, not mere whimsy to collect them into a single volume. There are various connections between the topics the different essays discuss: a number of them deal with the relation between ethics and politics, between individual values and the structuring of human social life, or with liberalism as a political philosophy; others are concerned with such central political and ethical values as freedom, happiness, or suffering, or with the idea of the success (or failure) of an individual human life or of a collectivity. Finally, several of the essays are concerned with the possibilities of radical social criticism, including the possibility that certain forms of historical inquiry or of art might have a critical potential. These are obviously closely related issues.

What strikes me most on rereading these essays, however, is a certain unity of attitude. One of the things that holds the essays in this collection together most closely is their shared skepticism about a particular way of thinking about what is important in human life which I take to be characteristic of contemporary European societies. By a “way of thinking” I do not, of course, mean a specific belief or even a characteristic set of specific beliefs, such as the belief that the earth is (roughly) round (or: flat), that witches must be burned at the stake (or: that there are no witches, and in any case no one ought to be punished by being burned at the stake), or that all species of plants and animals evolved gradually through natural selection (or: that they were all created, each in its unchanging form, at a particular point in time by an omnipotent deity). Rather what I have in mind is a very amorphous and ill-defined tacit assumption or set of assumptions about the nature of the human world, what is important in it, and how we can conceptualize it.

In the late eighteenth century Kant spoke of the distinction between a “cosmopolitan” and a “scholastic” conception of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The scholastic con-

<sup>1</sup> The discussion of Kant that follows conflates his two treatments on this topic: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymond Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner-Verlag, 1956; hereinafter *KrV*), B866–68, 832–35, and *Immanuel Kants Logik*, ed. Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche, in *Kant, Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1958), vol. III, A23–29. It is obviously influenced by Heidegger's *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (2nd edition, Frankfurt/M: Klostermann, 1951), pp. 185–88. I have a brief further discussion of this issue in my “Morality and Identity” in C. Korsgaard et al., *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 189–93.

ception was one which was limited to specifying the internal goal of philosophical activity: in Kant's view, the attempt to attain and justify a maximally extensive but unified system of knowledge of the world, without concerning itself with the intrinsic value of such activity, or its relation to any further human goals. Philosophy in the cosmopolitan sense, on the other hand, is concerned with the relation of knowledge to the final or essential ends of human reason, or, as Kant also puts it, with things that are necessarily of interest to every rational being. In the twenty-first century one might be inclined to wonder whether it makes any real sense of speak of the "essential ends of human reason," but Kant is firmly convinced that this is more than a metaphor expressive of what would have been for him an uncharacteristic state of exuberance. Human reason itself, he believes, has an essential interest, and this interest is summed up in the asking and answering of three questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. What may I hope for?<sup>2</sup>

Philosophy as a cosmopolitan enterprise, then, is metaphysics (answer to question 1), ethics (answer to question 2), and religion (answer to question 3). Philosophy as a whole, or various detached parts of it, might have any number of, as it were, "collateral" benefits, such as contributing to the general training of the mind or helping to resolve particular problems that arise in the domain of one of the special sciences. However, to focus exclusively on these instrumental contributions philosophy can make to human life is to miss the point, which is that the asking and answering of these questions has value in itself for human beings. It is, Kant thinks, self-evident that there is a specifically moral "ought" which binds our actions, and it is self-evidently important for its own sake to know what limits human knowledge has, how we "ought" to act, and whether the hopes for an afterlife held out by religions are or are not justified, or, if not exactly positively warranted, rationally permissible.

Kant saw himself and was taken by various of his contemporaries and some of his successors as a revolutionary figure ushering in a new age, but from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, eighteenth-century Prussia belongs to the very distant past, and the Kantian construct, rather than being especially forward-looking, is the last and most elaborate monument of a pe-

<sup>2</sup> As Heidegger points out (*Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, p. 187 f.), in the text edited by Jäsche from Kant's lectures (*Immanuel Kants Logik*, A26) Kant adds a fourth question, "What is man?," and states that in a certain sense the three other questions all "relate to" the fourth. Kant never actually makes much of this connection, however, and Heidegger seems to be right to claim that this is not an accident, but rather "*das Ungedachte in seinem Denken*," and that too clear and sustained a focus on this issue would have dissolved the Kantian philosophy from the inside.

riod of our history that looks in retrospect both brutally archaic and exceptionally decadent. The three great Kantian *Critiques* are like an elaborate set of stained glass windows, highly original in their genre perhaps and intended to last for centuries, but completed just in time to be smashed by Puritan mobs, motivated by new ideals and energies that put an end forever to the world to which they belonged, and in which alone they made sense. They may be of great interest to the archaeologist or art historian, and retain a certain appeal because of their scope, the boldness of their conception, and the delicacy of their filigree, but they are of no direct relevance to us.

Although we might congratulate ourselves on having left behind Kant's world of metaphysics-morality-religion, *Privatdozenten*, wigs, copper engravings, Euclidean geometry, public hangings, and enlightened (or unenlightened) royal absolutism, this self-congratulation is premature and unwarranted because the dominant worldview in contemporary Western societies is not as distinct from the doctrines of Kant as one might expect or as we might wish. In fact, it shows some distinct similarities with basic Kantian structures.<sup>3</sup> It, too, is oriented around three kinds of question, and a set of answers to them:

1. What do I want? What do you want? What do they want?
2. What do we know?
3. What restrictions ought there to be on the actions people perform, particularly on those that affect other people?

To put it very crudely, people in contemporary Western societies recognize three broad categories of "things" as unproblematically important:

- a) individual subjective human preferences; these are generally construed as *prima facie* hard, brassy, externally opaque, and atomistic, and as being expressed through word and deed
- b) useful knowledge, especially warranted, empirically supported belief that tells us how the world is, how it can be predicted to change, and how we might use it (i.e., science); to a lesser extent, also certain highly formal disciplines like mathematics that are thought—perhaps, of course, incorrectly—to be about helping us deal with the surrounding world
- c) a restrictive set of demands on action that could affect other people and that are usually construed as some set of universal laws or rules or principles; in particular, a set of universal laws on which "we" would all agree (under some further specified circumstances)

Knowledge and universal moral rules, as with Kant, are of intrinsic interest

<sup>3</sup> I am not asserting that the modern tripartite division is derived historically from Kant or the result of the direct influence of Kantianism, but am using the parallelism merely as an expository device.

and value, but in place of religion we have individual human preference. Everything else that can have any claim to our automatic and serious interest, it is assumed, must be in some way reducible to one or another of these three categories, or at any rate must be best approached through one or the other of them. Anything that does not is a delusion or at best something marginal and unimportant. Completely outside the three groups, however, there is thought to be only darkness.

When I say that a set of assumptions about the exclusive importance of these three categories in human life constitutes the final framework for most modern thinking, I do not mean that every modern person understands each of these categories clearly or even in the same way, or would necessarily affirm in an unprompted way the general statement that whatever does not fit into the tripartite schema must not be important. The assumptions in question form the tacit background of thinking and debate rather than a set of explicitly held views. We are familiar with political debates, in which different parties disagree so heatedly and, apparently, so radically on specific points that for those standing too close to the debate there seems to be little agreement or common ground between them. People do obviously differ very significantly in their specific conceptions of knowledge, morality, and human preference, and in their views or assumptions about the relation between them, and their relative importance in human life. However, if one is able to stand back, many, if not most, of the disagreements that loom so large for the participants themselves and their contemporaries can be seen to be differences within an overarching agreement of which the parties themselves might not be fully aware. Trotsky versus Stalin, Augustine versus Aquinas, Tiberius versus Piso, Rousseau versus virtually any contemporary of his one might wish to name; from a sufficient distance the similarities are more salient than the differences. There is no view-from-nowhere, and it is perhaps more difficult for us to step back from our own life and beliefs and the social, historical, and political matrix within which they are located than it is for us to take a detached view of people and movements in any case far removed from us in space or time, but that is no reason to think that a relatively abstract attitude is strictly impossible for us to adopt toward ourselves and our contemporaries, or that it would not be worth the effort to try to attain what cognitive distance from ourselves we can. Contrary to the *fables convenues*, this is, I think, one of the central theses of Nietzsche and of Foucault, and one I wish to endorse: one can reject the absolutist Platonic conception of the world and our knowledge of it without succumbing to Protagorean relativism.<sup>4</sup> Another common thread in these essays is the consideration of the implications of this thesis.

Within what I claim is this modern shared framework one can distinguish a wide variety of specifically differentiated positions: puritanical views that

<sup>4</sup> See "Nietzsche and Genealogy" in my *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and also "Genealogy as Critique" below.

give absolute priority to (c), positivist views that give priority to (b), and sybaritic views that give priority to (a); realist and instrumentalist views of knowledge; consequentialist and non-consequentialist accounts of morality; etc. One particular political configuration that will play an important role in several of the following papers is liberalism.<sup>5</sup> One of the central pillars of most contemporary liberalism is anti-paternalism, which in most of its forms presupposes that individual preferences in politics are to be taken as they come and not questioned.<sup>6</sup> Depending on the specific version of liberalism one considers, this view about preferences might be connected with a commitment to some universal moral principles.

Differences in the way one construes human preferences, how one thinks they relate to human knowledge and moral principles, or what weight one should give them in human life are extremely important, and much of modern philosophy is rightly devoted to trying to develop coherent, plausible positions on these topics, but looked at in broader terms, many of the controversies that preoccupy contemporary philosophy concern no more than different ways of distributing roughly the same pieces on the same board. I am suggesting that there might be some enlightenment to be gained from looking at the board and the pieces from the outside, even if one finally decides to return to one of the usual games.

All the essays in this collection are devoted in one way or another to trying to undermine what I claim to be the usual contemporary way of looking at and thinking about the world, showing its deficiencies both as a schema for understanding significant portions of human life and as a matrix for making evaluations. The essays share the view that there are many things that are of the greatest importance but do not fit comfortably into the tripartite scheme. The world is full of “things” that are not obviously subjective preferences, things that derive (or purport to derive) their value from being the objects of existing subjective preferences, moral rules, or bits of knowledge. In some societies at some times, and most notably and relevantly for us, in Western societies until about the middle of the nineteenth century, religion was a phenomenon that very notably escaped the tripartite division I have been describing. Religion was not a matter of personal preference—perhaps it has become a matter of mere preference in advanced Western countries now, but that is a sign of how far it has departed from its traditional vocation—nor a matter *merely* of a set of rules by which we live together. The same is true of music and poetry, and of society, history, power, politics, and existential choice.

<sup>5</sup> See also Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 69–109.

<sup>6</sup> As I try to show in my *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), “liberalism” has become such a broad church that it is difficult to make any generalizations about it at all. There are versions of “liberalism,” such as that developed by Joseph Raz, which do not hold to the strictest forms of anti-paternalism.

Although it would be natural to use the term “ethics” to refer to the third of the categories—rules that contain restrictions on the ways in which it is permissible to act toward other people—and I myself occasionally use the term in this way, I will also use the term in a more general way to refer to this whole way of seeing the world and thinking about it. The title “Outside Ethics” indicates in a narrow sense a rejection of the Kant-inspired view that the correct account of a good human life would give special prominence to universal rules, but in a wider sense it also indicates an attempt to step outside the whole triadic structure.

I am aware of the fact that the tripartite scheme I have described is extremely vague and ill-defined, but, as it were, that is not necessarily my fault. It would be a great mistake, and one it is only too easy to make when studying historical or ethnological material, to ascribe too much precision to that which is inherently imprecise. The need to avoid inappropriate, excessive, or fraudulent clarity in studying the human world is perhaps another general preoccupation that holds these essays together. In the mainstream of Western philosophy, and then also Western culture, since Parmenides one finds a very striking incremental glorification of a set of interrelated properties that are counted as virtues: clarity and consistency of thought, speech, and action, the ability to reflect, to detach oneself from prevailing opinion, to ask questions, to give reasons. By now this has developed into a series of highly structured disciplines—our arts and sciences—and sedimented into our everyday ways of thinking and acting, but it also seems rooted in human nature and is self-evidently of great value. Many of us strive for clarity and we do this for many of the excellent reasons the philosophic tradition has expounded in great detail. We tend to attribute to others an equal striving for and attainment of clarity with respect to their own beliefs, although the apparent generosity of this impulse sometimes can be suspected to mask a certain slyness, because it warrants us to put words in others’ mouths, the better thereby to catch them out and trip them up. Socrates, of course, was an unsurpassed master of this technique, and his example remains in this regard paradigmatic for much of contemporary philosophy.

However, as Nietzsche very powerfully pointed out, humans do not always exhibit maximal interest in clarity and explicitness, and they are right not to. Clarity is often of no use to us at all, and can in some circumstances be a positive hindrance to attaining various important human goods. In addition to our desire for clarity and definiteness, humans exhibit a second set of properties that are perhaps equally important, are very inadequately understood, are very little under our control, and are seriously underappreciated. These are the powers of forgetting, ignoring, failing to ask questions.<sup>7</sup> Similarly,

<sup>7</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe (KS)*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 245–

when Heidegger speaks of the original conception of truth as “*aletheia*” the philology might be poor, but one of the points he is trying to make is, I think, correct.<sup>8</sup> What we can “know”—that about which we have “beliefs”—is something we must pull out of the darkness into a clearing that has been made. Determining the relative relation of the light and darkness which we attribute to other human agents requires a nice power of discrimination and judgment.

If this is the case, the result is an upgrading of the role of contingency, history, and “politics” (in the small “p” sense of the term). If we are capable of stepping back from our own beliefs and the usual standards we use to evaluate them, and looking at them in their wider historical and social context, we will notice that what we believe depends on who asks what question, how exactly formulated, and making what assumptions at what time, and in what order. This is *not* in itself an argument against the existence of “truth” or in favor of that philosophers’ will-o’-the-wisp “relativism,” but a simple generalization about how human life is constituted.

The first two essays in the collection, “Liberalism and Its Discontents” and “Neither History nor Praxis,” treat the most well-entrenched, and one of the most pernicious, forms of contemporary political thought, the highly Kantianized liberalism originally popularized by Rawls. I am particularly keen to emphasize that it is a mistake to moralize politics or to construe it as “applied ethics” in the Rawlsian way. The essay entitled “Outside Ethics” discusses a line of historical development in European thought that bypasses the tripartite schema. The rest of the essays deal with various topics—freedom, happiness, human suffering, religion, forms of criticism—with an emphasis on the extent to which they do or do not fit into what I claim is the modern worldview. Religion, as I have mentioned, was one of the most important traditional phenomena that provided a general framework for large parts of the world during long historical periods, but which does not lend itself readily to assimilation to the modern tripartite schema. For a number of institutional and sociological reasons, and because of the inherent implausibility of its belief-structure, religion can, I believe, no longer play the role it once did, but it still needs urgently to be understood correctly both because of its historical significance and because of the nostalgic hopes for reviving fragments of the

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334; *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* §§ 68, 217 (KV, vol. 5, pp. 86, 153); *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Essay I, § 10, Essay II, § 1 (KV, vol. 5, pp. 273, 291–92); also Harald Weinrich, *Lethe: Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens* (3rd ed., Munich: Beck, 2000). What, one might wonder, would have happened if Oedipus had listened to his mother (OT 1056 ff) and stopped asking so many bloody questions. The plot of *Parsifal* turns in the reverse direction, depending as it does on the imbecility of the main character (“*der dumbe helt*,” as he came to be known, or as Wagner has it, “*der reine Tor*”) and his failure to ask questions.

<sup>8</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “*Aletheia* (Heraklit Fragment 16),” in his *Vorträge und Aufsätze: Teil III* (Neske, 1954), pp. 53–78.



original religious worldview that resurface again and again in the modern world.

The two essays on poetry might seem from their ostensible topic to be only tangentially related to the other essays in the collection. They are devoted to arguing that poetry has no essence; it is a changing historical configuration of different elements, projects, forms, and conditions, but in particular it is not (universally) a form of knowledge in any interesting, distinctive sense, nor does its value lie directly and exclusively in the fact that it satisfies the “preferences” of many humans. Its relation to rules for dealing with other people is indirect and so highly mediated that it requires special analysis, and can never be taken for granted.

These essays, then, aspire to be antiliberal, antipositivist, and antireligious in equal measure. Although their focus is on the supersession of the particular tripartite conception I have described as characteristic of modern thinking, this naturally raises the general issue about how one can criticize well-entrenched general conceptions, and about getting cognitive and moral distance from ourselves that would allow us to “improve” our situation, whatever “improve” might turn out to mean. To “go beyond,” to “step outside of,” to “overcome,” to “transcend,” to “sublate”: although these terms have had an important traditional usage in certain areas in philosophy, they have had perhaps an even more important career as central concepts in many religions, and it would be reasonable to wonder to what extent they retain religious associations.

One of Nietzsche’s most important legacies to us, I have suggested above, is his claim that it is desirable and possible to dismantle the Platonic apparatus of Forms, Absolute Truth, the Idea of the Good, etc. and its historical derivatives, such as Kant’s transcendental philosophy, and that this can be done without fear of falling into “relativism.” There is, however, a second and slightly different set of issues that also arises in part from the increasing implausibility of Platonist and Kantian approaches to philosophy, but more directly from the decline of traditional religions. The members of the Frankfurt School felt it important to deny that we had to choose between traditional transcendental religion and “positivism.”<sup>9</sup> There is no God and no God’s-eye view, but this does not imply that we are trapped in the present, condemned merely to mirror the “facts” of the world that surrounds us, or to engage at best in merely piecemeal criticism of our social institutions, as, according to the members of the Frankfurt School, “positivists” would have it. Nietzsche seems sometimes to replace the “transcendence” which stands at the center of traditional accounts—the existence of a transcendent God, or, failing that, a transcendental viewpoint—with that of a continually transcending activity

<sup>9</sup> See Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

(“*Überwindung*” in one of the senses in which that term is used).<sup>10</sup> There is no single, final perspective, but given any one perspective, we can always go beyond it. I merely note that to take this as implying a guarantee that we will *always* (necessarily?) be able to go beyond any given position we might occupy, would be to fall back into a theological view. For Nietzsche, whether or not we will be able to “overcome” the one-sidedness of a perspective in which we find ourselves is an open question, for him a question of one’s strength. One need not endorse Nietzsche’s late-Romantic glorification of “strength” to accept his view that there are no guarantees of the requisite kind in the nature of things.

The essays stand in what I take to be the tradition of the early (i.e., pre-1970) Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, although the specific version of the Critical Theory which I favor contains a stronger Nietzschean component than most other versions. The early members of the Frankfurt School wanted to put together retention of some orientation toward a transcendental perspective with naturalism (although they call it “materialism”), a sort of religiosity without *any* of the dogmatic content of any particular religion. It is, of course, highly questionable whether they did succeed in giving a coherence to this, but then it is also an open question in my view whether or not such coherence is required of a position that by its nature is intended to be merely negative. I feel considerably less sure about my own position on this issue than I do about Nietzsche’s rejection of Plato. The relation between Critical Theory and Nietzsche/Foucault is in any case a further recurrent theme in the essays in this volume (and one that I treat more thematically and extensively in my *Glück und Politik: Potsdamer Vorlesungen* [Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2004]). The essays do not propose positive theories, but they attempt to analyze, point out reservations, and criticize; they make no apology for this. They do not even assume that there *must* be answers. The idea that all problems either have a solution or can be shown to be pseudo-problems is not one I share.

These essays invite consideration of what there might be outside the artificially illuminated circle of “Ethics.” One must, of course, resist the temptation to assume that there must be *just one* “thing” outside ethics, but one of the things there might be is a humanly important notion of “enlightenment.” The notion of being an “enlightened” person does not reduce simply to that of being a person who has highly developed cognitive abilities or disposes of a vast stock of knowledge; neither does it reduce to the idea of being a morally good or socially useful person. “Enlightenment” is not a “value-free” concept because it is connected with some idea of devoting persistent, focused attention to that which is genuinely important in human life, rather than to mar-

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*: “Von der Selbst-Überwindung” (in *KS*, vol. 4, pp. 146–49).

ginal or subsidiary phenomena, to drawing the “correct” conclusions from attending to these important features—whatever they are—and to embodying these conclusions concretely in one’s general way of living. It involves a certain amount of sheer knowledge, an ability to concentrate and reflect, inventiveness in restructuring one’s psychic, personal, and social habits; but to be enlightened is not to “have” any bit of doctrine, but to have been (re)structured in a certain way. This is a value-laden concept because it depends on some notion of what is important. To say that it is value-laden is not to say it is arbitrary or “merely subjective,” because the values relative to which we pick out what is important are generally embedded in a network of factual and other beliefs and are themselves perfectly amenable to revision on the basis of new information and further reflection. The idea of some perfect or universal Enlightenment in which one has got everything that is important in the right perspective with the right consequences probably does not make sense, but what follows from that is that there are different degrees of enlightenment and perhaps different ways of being enlightened, not that the concept does not make any sense at all. “Enlightenment” in the sense in which I am using it now does not function the way many other *idées directrices* in the history of philosophy, such as “truth” or Kantian “duty,” have done. A proposition is true or false (and that is the end of it); according to Kant, something is my duty or not (and that is the end of it). One difference between such concepts and “enlightenment” is that it makes little sense to say categorically that a certain way of behaving or living is “enlightened;” the *context* that needs to be specified in order to make this a meaningful statement is all-important. The context that needs to be supplied in order to make sense of the claim “That is an enlightened way to treat children” is very different from that presupposed by “That is an enlightened way to organize the health services in a rural area of this kind” or “They are enlightened employers.” One can, of course, admit that there is a coherent notion of enlightenment while yet leaving open the question exactly how important this notion is, although at this point the discussion immediately becomes reflective: How important is it to live a life that in some sense responds to those features of the world which you perceive to be important?

These essays will have served their purpose amply if readers come to agree with me that a historically informed and contextually sensitive approach to those areas of philosophy that are directly concerned with our human world is an exceptionally good way to contribute to further human enlightenment.