

Cooking With Kai

Gnosis Feature Interview with Kai Nielsen



Kai Nielsen's philosophical interests cover but are not limited to: moral philosophy, ethics and meta-ethics, naturalism, philosophy of religion, pragmatism and neo-pragmatism, political philosophy, Marxism, globalization, and metaphilosophy. His recent books include: *Naturalism and Religion* (Prometheus Books, 2001) and *Naturalism Without Foundations* (Prometheus Books, 2000). His forthcoming book, with the title of *Globalization and Justice*, will be published this fall or winter by Humanity Press.

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Besides philosophy, he enjoys travelling, hiking in the country, novels, films, fine wine ... and cooking.

Gnosis: *In Naturalism Without Foundations you defend a “weak consequentialism” that shows, you say, that “You do not have to be a utilitarian to believe that moral agents, faced with the necessity of choice, should ... always do the lesser evil even when doing the lesser evil involves overriding what justice requires” (p. 248). What are your thoughts about how this kind of view could or should find its way into the current political scene and discussions between globalizers and anti-globalizers?*

KN: I'll divide that question to a standardly theoretical part and to a less theoretical part. The theoretical part first. Consequentialism has traditionally been tied to the various forms of utilitarianism. People like Brian Berry and myself, amongst others, have tried to develop an account that's consequentialist while remaining neutral about utilitarianism; you could be a utilitarian and hold that position but you don't need to be one. I think that's an important thing to do but I also think none of us, to my knowledge, has worked out the distinction clearly enough. Someone could still press that if you say always do the lesser evil, aren't you still committed to some form of utilitarianism? I think not and I won't go into the reasons why not here, they're complicated, but I just want to say that that issue is not sorted out as well as it should be. Perhaps it's best articulated by Brian Berry. Perhaps all that needs to be caught by normative theories is that they be what Amartya Sen calls consequence-sensitive.

But setting aside that theoretical question, the claim that one should always do the lesser evil seems to have almost, though not exactly, a tautological force. When we come to how this relates to current political discussions between globalizers and anti-globalizers the issue is not clear because people on both sides will claim that their positions are just, and they will claim that their views result in the lesser evil. If they did philosophy they could agree with Rawls that justice is the first virtue of institutions, and as such neither one tries to override the claims of justice. People like myself who are on the anti-globalizer side, or I might say more accurately the anti capitalist globalizers side, think that the globalization process has given rise to some incredible injustices and we conclude from that that it's wrong. From here you can see the problem: globalizers will usually concede that, yes, globalization has produced a lot of bad and even unfair results but, they will argue, you can't make Rome in a day. You have to consider things as to how they work out in the end. Evidently there are certain things that at a certain time T could be unjust, and not only could be but are. However, although globalizers would never want to use the Leninist phrase, “ You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs,” the results further down the road – at time T₁ – could be just. From this globalizers conclude that if you really want a just and good

society sometimes you have to take harsh means, and so they would try to justify themselves in that way. That means that they're saying "Whatever you do, take the least evil course" and then you have a kind of long-run/short-run thing. I suppose they'd be committed to a position that in the long run capitalist globalization may be the lesser evil though in the short run you may have to do things that are very very bad. Some others, take philosophers like D. Z. Phillips or Leszek Kolakowski, would follow the old slogan – I guess it goes back to St. Paul – "You may never do evil so that good may come." But what about when you make considered judgments and you don't take "Never do evil that good may come" but "Do the lesser evil" when you can't avoid something that's evil no matter what you do? And it is in this context where the "dirty hands" problem becomes powerful in a weaker consequentialism.

When you think about it in terms of particular processes, such as the globalization and anti-globalization thing you brought up, I think that's a less genuine example of the problem because there you have a short range evil or a long range good and so how does that fit with "always do the lesser evil"? Presumably the sensible way of reading that is to take it as in the long run: do what is in the long run the lesser evil. But then we get something that is very indeterminate. And in that way there is an empirical conflict, supposing they're both weak consequentialists, between the globalizers, and anti-globalizers, but no conflict in moral principles. What is a much better example of whether you can allow the lesser evil doctrine to stand no matter what comes up is over issues around terrorism. Terrorism and torture stand as two of the best concrete examples of what I have in mind. It's certainly the case that torture – and it should go without saying – is a violation of any concept of human decency; moreover, it is also a war crime. Now, films like *The Battle of Algiers* show something important about the question of whether you are ever justified in torturing or committing acts of terrorism. You see it in the case of the French where they torture someone to keep bombs from exploding all over Algiers. Now you say, torture is always wrong, yes it's always *prima facie* wrong, but in that situation, especially if you have the doctrine "Do the lesser evil", isn't it clearly the lesser evil? That film makes it convincing that the French leader of the elite troops is no beast who enjoys torturing. He hated to do it. He did it only to the point of getting the necessary information about where the bombs were set to go off. As soon as he got the information he stopped. So it looks like in that circumstance that torture was justified. Likewise with acts of terrorism, the Algerians responded to a systematic destruction of their cells by setting off bombs in cafes and travel offices. Given the fact that if you think that they had a right to self-determination and the French were not about to give up it is

certainly arguable that, given this was the only effective way for the Algerians to fight back, that those terrorist acts were justified. Take it into the present. Most of us think that the Palestinians blowing themselves up in Israel, a grizzly thing with body parts all over the place, killing innocent people, children, for example, is beyond the pale. Normally it would be. But it seems to be not terribly different from what the Algerians did in fighting the French. If we had very good reasons to think that it would – though we can't know that for sure – not stiffen the Israeli resolve but gradually weaken the Israeli resolve, and if we think that the Israeli occupation of Palestine is as bad as many of us do, it's not as obvious, if there is no other way to achieve the liberation of Palestine, that those terrorist acts are wrong as we often, and rightly, think them to be. This is a real question for us and it fits with the weak consequentialism. If you're a Kantian deontologist or you're a Christian, or I suppose have almost any other religion, you would have to say it's just *categorically* excluded. But it doesn't seem to me that it is obviously categorically excluded. In fact I think I'd say something stronger and say that *sometimes* it's even, all things considered, justified. This depends on whether there is any alternative to it and it depends on whether it's likely to be effective. Now that's a hard doctrine, a doctrine most people don't want to accept or even hear about. As far as I can see the only way you can justify it is on a straightforward consequentialist utilitarian grounds or on a weak consequentialist one. There are plenty of criticisms of straightforward, total consequentialism, that is, utilitarianism. If our kind of account, the Berry-Nielsen account of weak consequentialism, has anything to say for it, that might provide a rationale for this.

Before I leave this question I just want to say one more thing. To talk about whether terrorism is justified is, I think, overly romantic. Not to take back anything I just said, but most acts of terrorism that are perpetuated are just evil and thugs do them. And they're not justified or even excusable. And it's not even actually an important problem to think through questions like the so-called war on terrorism. Politically speaking, the really serious terrorism is *state* terrorism like the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese bombing of Nanking, the Allied bombing of Dresden, and so forth. That's the serious terrorism and it's totally wrong; although, perhaps, I shouldn't quite say "totally". I could see somebody arguing that the saturation bombing by the Allies of Germany, including the fire bombing, directed against civilians, was horrible but justified in that it brought the war to an end quickly and decisively, and in doing this liberated the concentration camps. I don't believe that for a moment. I think, as a matter of fact, that it strengthened the resolve of the Germans. But suppose that I'm empirically wrong and that it would have hastened the

victory of the Allies and quickened the liberation of the concentration camps. Then even state terrorism, under certain circumstances, could in principle at least be judged to be justified. But I'd like to see a real example of this. It's important to distinguish between ideal theory and theory that, while critical of how things are, fits the world as it is.

Gnosis: *In your writings, 'weak consequentialism' seems to go with Peircean/Deweyan pragmatism. What connection between 'weak consequentialism' and pragmatism do you draw? Do you think that Rorty's re-popularization of pragmatism helps to make this connection sufficiently emphatic or intelligible? If not, do you think philosophy and/or philosophers can and should do that?*

KN: Let me tackle the first question, or the first part of a complex question, first. I don't think there's any tight relationship between Peircean/Deweyan pragmatism and weak consequentialism but I think they fit together well. And the reason I think they fit together well is that Dewey – particularly Dewey – stressed what he called the means-ends continuum. Moral argument is not simply about ends. Ends and means are constantly related together and given the means, given the actual circumstances, we might make quite different judgments about ends. If you have that theoretical conception which was very central to Dewey and most pragmatists, although I should say not at all central to Peirce, that means invariably that you have to pay attention to consequences: that you're looking at the relationship between means and ends and how can you decide that without being consequentialist? So I think there's that connection. About Rorty's re-popularization of pragmatism, does this help? I don't think very much in this context. Mainly because, as much as I admire Rorty, when he talks about ethics for example, though he says some good things about the necessity of being contextual, about being suspicious of ethical theory and the like, he often just arm waves. He obviously has Kant in mind when he attacks ethical theory. He says the important thing is to think about human happiness – Mill said everything we need to say. Well, I respond, Mill didn't say everything we need to say. It's obvious that happiness is not the only important moral consideration – though tremendously important. Faced with a lot of deontology, with a lot of Kantianism, it might be useful to say what Rorty says. But it's not going to be very helpful for anyone trying to think through what should be said about this because it's just too simplistic. So I don't think Rorty is much help at all here. If anything he works in the wrong direction. But I do think,

and this fits with the first question, that we philosophers, social scientists, eggheads, etc. should try to think very carefully about how we weigh consequences and where we give them what weight and the like. But I don't think that Rorty helps us much here. What he, and Dewey as well, may give us a good sense of is that there is nothing that is going to be categorical, that will make us into people that Elizabeth Anscombe won't want to discuss with.

Gnosis: *Pragmatism, as described by Dewey and Rorty, stresses the evolutionary aspects of human cultural life wherein human fulfillment, or realization, comes to fruition through a gradual process of constant development (in the sciences and in philosophy) and greater and greater human solidarity. Rorty makes the express point that pragmatists should avoid major social movements or calls for revolution in favor of smaller scale efforts that aim, locally, at alleviating human suffering and humiliation through a step by step process of "expanding our moral imagination". In light of this, how do you, as a Marxist, resolve this account of pragmatism with the Marxist demand for radical social upheaval?*

KN: This seems to me an important question with no obvious answer. On the one hand, I feel a considerable sympathy with Rorty's skepticism about grand theory. This notion of large scale theories as held by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, to say nothing of the large scale theories of some philosophers who came before them, lack the testability a good theory should have, even in a weak sense of testability. Particularly in the social sciences, grand theories seem not to work very well. There is something to be said, however, about projects and small-scale reforms, and trying to come to grips with particular problems in a particular context such as bringing an end to homelessness, getting rid of the phenomenon of battered women, cleaning up the St. Lawrence River and so forth and so on and so on. It's absolutely central that these things be done and that we engage in small scale problems with a reformist aim. Larger scale projects are prone to be not much more than hot air. Rorty is importantly skeptical about large scale projects and I share that skepticism. But on the other hand, there can be lots of small reforms that don't add up to anything. We need to have some conception of where we're going with these reforms. And now I want to be historical for a moment: shortly after the deaths of Marx and Engels, the person who inherited the Marx-Engels archives, a man named Eduard Bernstein, developed a form of what he called evolutionary socialism. Evolutionary socialism did just the kind of Rorty thing, little changes here, little

changes there. The idea was to lead to socialism through constant reform. Most Marxists rejected it as revisionism. One of the most intelligent and important Marxists who criticized Bernstein in an intelligent way was a philosopher-economist called Rosa Luxemburg. She said there could not be a setting of reform against revolution – both are needed. But you need to make as sure as you reasonably can, in a way she thought Bernstein didn't, that you know in what direction you're trying to push the reforms. In 1970 I published an article called "The Choice Between Reform and Revolution" where I tried to restate that kind of argument in contemporary terms.

The really serious issue is to ask whether the reforms we are making are moving in the direction of something more emancipatory. For me it would be a form of socialism. That's what you have to use, that's the measure you have to take. Whatever else the reforms achieve, they should empower the working class, to put it in standard old Marxist terms. It's never a good thing to deliberately develop reforms that will weaken, you hope only for a time, a group of people whose good you are trying to aid. We don't want to use the slogan that the German Communist Party used when Hitler was coming to power: "After Hitler then Us". We don't usually make things better by first making them worse. (But, to add a jarring note, what about what I have just said about the Palestinian response to Israeli occupation?) We don't have a method to predict whether these reforms will truly be emancipatory or not; we just have to play it by ear. If we keep making reforms will it eventually lead to the transformation of society that we Marxists or socialists want or won't they? My own guess is, and I hope I'm wrong here, that the capitalists will never give up without a fight. But we can't be certain of this. In South Africa the old Apartheid regime fell without a fight. In Iran the Shah fell without a fight. There are a number of places where this has happened. We don't have a social science, let alone a philosophy, to tell us when Apartheid will fall, if it will, will it fall without a fight? I once wrote that you could not solve things in Africa without a bloody revolution. I was wrong. South Africa's emancipation hasn't solved all its problems in the short term, but we think it's solving some of them, and with good reason. We think things are better than they were under Apartheid. How capitalism's downfall will come about – as eventually it will (no mode of production lasts forever) – is a question that only history can decide. So it seems to me that the rational thing, the reasonable thing, is to be for reforms where they have the potential for pushing in the right direction. If the United States had a national health care service, they'd be that much better off. We have to look at what kind of reforms are occurring, and make judgments about them. We plainly shouldn't in general be against reform, but we also shouldn't exclude revolution either. So that's how I stand.

Gnosis: *You believe, not just that atheism is right, but that egalitarian secularism holds out more hope for the living conditions of the poor and disenfranchised than does religious fundamentalism (as an influence on public policy). In his later conception of justice as fairness, Rawls expressed a hope for an “overlapping consensus” of all major political and religious groups. How do you balance religious tolerance with your secular egalitarian convictions? Why do you believe that Rawls turned to a desire for an “overlapping consensus”? Why and how do you avoid this?*

KN: To begin with, why would I say that egalitarian secularism holds out more hope for the poor and disenfranchised, than, for instance, fundamentalist Islam? We must first keep in mind that there are various forms of fundamentalist Islam and, as well, that not all Islam is fundamentalist. But fundamentalist Islam has terrible policies which certainly will hurt women: lack of reasonable education, authoritarian control by their husbands, exclusion from the public society etc., etc. These things can't but harm people. A secular egalitarian system is just the opposite of that. There's also the thing that secular egalitarianism will be more attending to the various uses we can make of science to overcome human woe and to achieve more human prosperity. I'm not trying to say that science will fix everything, but it does help. I'm very glad when I get my teeth filled I don't have to go in without Novocain and the like. So in those two ways, important ways, and you could easily add to them, secular egalitarianism would achieve more in terms of living conditions than fundamentalism concerning human prosperity and avoidance of woe. Having said that, what most people don't see about most of these fundamentalisms, whether in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Palestine, or Saudi Arabia, is that as bad as they are in certain respects they have done one thing. With the failure of Nasserism and socialist revolutionary movements in most Arabic countries, with the rule of the people by corrupt tyrannical oligarchs who have no concern for the well-being of their subjects, and with the support of the United States of the corrupt oligarchs, about the only help ordinary people can often get in terms of their living conditions, whether they have healthcare, whether they have a place to stay, whether they have enough food is done by fundamentalist organizations. They have stepped in after the failure of secular organizations and that can't be ignored. Whether they're doing it only to impose religion on people I don't really know, but the effect is that some people eat where otherwise they wouldn't eat, some people have books and schools where otherwise they wouldn't have books and schools. Bad schools, but at least literacy of any kind is an advance. So I don't think we can say that all Islamic fundamentalism is in every respect deplorable.

As for Rawls, justice only demands, and I agree with this completely, that you have reasonable comprehensive schemes and reasonable conceptions of the good, reasonable not in the sense that they are the best grounded but in the sense that reflective people could endorse them and realize in endorsing them that you don't undermine basic conceptions of right and justice. As long as you have a reasonable pluralism and stick with that, you are away and clear. But religious fundamentalism is something else. This is so whether it is Christian, Judaic, or Islamic. But these fundamentalisms aside, between more normal world religions in our society, namely Christian, Jewish, Islamic religions and secular world views, there will be an overlapping consensus on questions of justice. Although, let's say, a Christian will defend a common conception of justice to that of a secularist, she will, at least in part, defend it with different reasons. Nonetheless, there is an agreement about what this conception is. And so I don't have any problem balancing them all any more than Rawls does; as long as the religious and secular conceptions are reasonable, respect civility and reciprocity, they can and should live together. I think in a pluralistic society there is no hope for getting any general agreement on the common good. One may be able to get a general agreement about what is just or right but not about the common good. This implies that people like Charles Taylor and Iris Murdoch are really out to lunch because they think you need a common conception of the good for society to be stable, for society to be just. I think it's just the reverse. In a pluralistic society if you tried for that the only way you could do it would be by enforcing it. You would end up with a totalitarian, or at least an authoritarian, society that defended a common conception of the good and defends it by force. What you need are reasonable pluralisms. You might argue how do you decide what is reasonable, and there Rawls is very careful. Rawls is talking about public reason, reason that people with different comprehensive conceptions could agree upon and that you would have to be able to defend by asking whether this is something that we – that is, people who are part of such pluralisms – can live with given the burdens of judgment, given the past pluralities of society and its resulting political culture. What we can live with here is what counts as reasonable. There is no overleaping history here. Rawls, in a rather famous footnote, in *Political Liberalism*, remarks there are other conceptions of reasonable. One might have certain philosophic conceptions of what would be a reasonable comprehensive conception of what is good but that's not part of public reason and you have to ignore such things in debates about political justice. I have my differences with Rawls but there I think he's exactly right.

Gnosis: *In a seminar course, you once commented that as a student studying psychology, you found Freud's work vastly more interesting than the behaviorist psychology you were being taught at the time. Even though Freud believed he had found the underlying source of religious belief in the projected desire for an exalted father figure, classical psychoanalysis is generally recognized as an unfalsifiable theory riddled with sometimes far-fetched speculations and which seems to serve a structurally similar role to religion in accounting for human motivations and ethical interaction. What then did you find in it of interest? What value do you currently place on it?*

KN: One thing I should say initially is that I haven't thought seriously about Freud for around 30 years, and that's a considerable length of time. Another thing I should say is that when I complained about the course I took I was never a student of psychology, I only took one elementary course in psychology and I had read a little of Freud before. And this course was monumentally stupid. It wasn't even sophisticated like later behaviorism; they didn't even try to theorize it. We learned a lot about rats, never anything about human beings. A little mathematics was thrown in. I learned absolutely nothing of any use. And I once asked the professor what about Freud – "Freud," he answered, "He's not a psychologist!" So I was completely turned off. When Chomsky criticized behaviorists, I thought, "That's dead right, that's dead right." As for Freud, when I came to know him better, I had and have no use for the metapsychological Freud; that's all bullshit as far as I'm concerned. The Freud of his clinical papers seemed to me, and still seems to me, interesting. The explanations of why people make slips, of why people can't get erections, why people behave in sadistic ways, these are little explanations and small scale theory that even Rorty would have liked. But there are these big theories like in *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* where Freud draws out his big metapsychological framework – with the death instinct, the Id, the ego, and the superego. That I think is pretty bad and I put it in the context of more bullshit; it has all the weaknesses of traditional metaphysical philosophy in that it's extremely speculative. I don't know if it's correct to say, but in the sensible sense it's unfalsifiable. If you make a fairly strong notion of falsifiability then most of science is unfalsifiable too. But if you follow the later Hempel, influenced by Kuhn, you get a very historicist contextualist conception of testability that I think any scientific theory has to meet. And maybe with those weakened constraints even Freudian theory is testable – though I expect not. I expect that the theory is just something that can be jettisoned; it is a wheel that turns no machinery.

There's a big dispute about whether using Freudian theory we can determine when someone has been cured. I kind of know it from the inside because I was psychoanalyzed. No Freudian has ever given us a very good sense of when someone is cured or when to terminate the analysis and, as far as I can see, that's somewhat bothersome. If people ask me, did you get anything from your psychoanalysis? I would have to say, well it didn't hurt me. But when I think back, it did in some way help me; but I'm not sure that if I had a good friend, who was prepared to listen attentively, who I talked to honestly and non-evasively over a long period that it would have not have done just as well as psychoanalysis. I'm not hostile toward psychoanalysis but I'm extremely skeptical about it, except as giving explanations of verbal slips. There's an ordinary language philosopher called Norman Malcolm, and he at several times ended up being called accidentally, including in print, *Normal* Malcolm. Now why that? If you know anything about Norman Malcolm you could see why someone might say that, and so how do you explain why this comes out? That might not be a particularly good example, but there are all kinds of examples that I think Freud is great about. Including some of the things he says which are less theoretical about dreaming.

Gnosis: *Most projects with emancipatory interests, whether they be Kant's, Habermas's, or Adorno's, have latched onto some pre-scientific non-reified utopian space of experience, whether it be a feeling of respect for the moral law, a normative structure of communication, or, as in the case of Adorno, autonomous art. Does analytic Marxism have any place for such a non-reified utopian space (e.g., a production paradigm or unconstrained creative work), and if not, why not?*

KN: I think that analytic Marxism does have a space for what you're talking about, and it comes out clearly in the work of G. A. Cohen, John Roemer, and Eric Olin Wright. The place they give to talking about social justice and an egalitarian ethos, things that traditional Marxists tried not to talk about (they thought it was all ideological warble). Here there is the space you speak about and they use it. I might add that they, between them, use it in different ways: some people might say that the work of John Roemer, when he talks about social justice, equal opportunity and the like, is horribly scientific. From this some concur that scientism and analytic Marxism go hand-in-hand. Roemer has just published an article recently in the *Journal of Philosophy* about equality that I can't even read. There are so many big mathematical things in it I suspect most of my colleagues can't read it either. Probably only some economists can read it. Roemer has a way of writing which is extremely scientific

and it goes with being an economist; on the other hand, Eric Olin Wright, who's a sociologist, and G. A. Cohen, who's a philosopher, don't share Roemer's scientistic style. So I think there are some things some analytical Marxists make use of which are in fact bits of scientism. I would say in defense of Roemer, however, that when he talks in plain English the scientism drops out and he reasons in just the same way as most of the other analytical Marxists. Read his *A Future for Socialism*. So I think the charge of scientism has some application but not any deep application.

Gnosis: *What role do you see aesthetics playing in analytic Marxist philosophy? How do you view the role of aesthetics from within your own philosophical orientation?*

KN: I think I'm a very bad person to say anything about that, and I think I can give the beginning of an explanation of why I am so ill-suited to say anything about that. I came to philosophy from English Literature and I went to graduate school at a university where there was a then-famous aesthetician named Catherine Gilbert. She and some German colleague wrote the standard book on history of aesthetics which I thought was a terrible bore. At that time I also had a certain contempt for the social sciences. I didn't know anything about them, but I had a typical literary person's contempt for them. I loved to go around quoting Stuart Hampshire, "Well one thing about anthropology is that you learn something, that's how it's different from sociology." So I had that deep, if you will, prejudice. I was anxious to study aesthetic theory. I started studying with this nice old professor ... and I was bored. I learned about the beautiful and the sublime and the good and various psychological theories like Clyde Bell's. And it was – or so it seemed to me – so dumb. I remember thinking, what in the devil is this? At that moment I decided that I never wanted anything to do again with aesthetics. And the only good thing Catherine Gilbert did for me was she said, "Well you need to learn something about primitive art, so why don't you take this course in anthropology?" I did and *that* was interesting! It nearly made me into an anthropologist. I started to get a respect for the social sciences. Lucky I started with anthropology. I never read any aesthetics after that. I stayed away from it like the plague. Except for when ordinary language philosophy was coming in, and I was spending a lot of time thinking about the concept of the moral, there were people – Frank Sibly among them – who wrote about the concept of art. So I read a few papers, of an analytical sort, which seemed to have the virtues of ordinary language philosophy. But since I wasn't intensely interested in the subject I more

or less forgot about it. I never read Walter Benjamin about it, or Adorno, or anybody else. I read Herbert Marcuse but I tried to skip those parts. And this is probably not justified. There is probably good work being done in aesthetics. The only thing I ever read and I liked, and this was about literature, was Sartre on “What is Literature?”. It related literature to ideology and ideology critique and I thought that was very interesting, and Simone de Beauvoir wrote similarly. But aside from that I paid no real attention to aesthetics. All I remember, from my early graduate student days, was this horrendously boring course that I took.

Gnosis: *Can philosophy play any special role in matters of political deliberation, or ought philosophers just leave politics to sociologists, political scientists, and other social scientists? What can philosophers qua philosophers offer to productive political discourse?*

KN: That question needs a careful and reflective answer. Certainly philosophers shouldn't leave politics to sociologists, political scientists, or to anybody else for that matter. Okay, that I think is obvious. It's a way of saying that certainly anybody who is a reflective, critical intellectual, or anybody who can think, should intervene in this – and try to do it well. As to the question, what can philosophers *qua* philosopher offer to productive political discourse, up until a few years ago, I spent a lot of my time thinking about how you distinguish philosophical activity from other activities. If you read the introduction to *Méta-philosophie: Reconstructing Philosophy*, that Jocelyne Couture and I wrote, you'll see us spending a lot of our time arguing about how you can demarcate philosophy from other activities – particularly attacking Quine. I now think that is mistaken, and I think Quine is right: the fence is down. He's at least roughly right about the analytic/synthetic distinction. There is no important distinction between philosophy and these other activities. No clear distinction. No non-contextual distinction. There are certain things that we philosophers do, although sometimes people in legal theory, sometimes people in economics, sometimes political scientists, do it equally well, if not better. But we do have a kind of expertise. Thinking about concepts, thinking about the use of words. We can probably do this better than most people. Sometimes doing that is important like if one is going to give a course in globalization. At the very beginning one needs to think about how the word “globalization” is used. You have to be fairly clear about this. If one wants to talk about terrorism, one also needs to do that. But that's just a first step. The very beginning first step. And to spend your time doing only this, as was done in the heyday of ordinary language philosophy, is a great mistake. A

paradigm case of that was a book written at that time called *The Vocabulary of Politics*. The whole book was talking about the ordinary uses of the word “power”, the uses of the word “imperialism” and so on. Doing just this strikes me as moving in the wrong direction. The advent into moral and political philosophy of John Rawls made an enormous difference. He didn’t try to define “justice”, he assumed an understanding of the use of the term “justice” and wanted to talk about different conceptions of justice. And there he had in play all kinds of considerations: historical considerations, theoretical considerations as to the way he worked out contractualism, a lot of theoretical devices he worked out like his original position, reflective equilibrium, and the like. Here you have philosophy liberated from the notion of just being conceptual analysis. But yet it was still not something that old fashion political scientists do: Rawls didn’t do statistical analysis of voting behavior or anything like that. But somebody once wrote – Rorty I think it was – and I think with some justification, that Rawls could have been a legal scholar, or a historian and have written very much the same book he did. I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration because Rawls shows two things that it’s unlikely a legal scholar or historian would have. First, Rawls shows incredible mastery and critical understanding of the history of ethical theory. You can see it resonating throughout his whole work. Moreover, he was not just somebody who was recording what other people said, but was developing his own theories against an enormous background in the history of moral and political theory. That was important and it enriched his work. So there’s something that philosophers could bring to thinking about politics. And also it’s sometimes good to stop and ask, what’s the moral point of view? Is there such a thing as the moral point of view? Or should we not talk about the moral point of view but about moral points of view? Those are fairly distinctive philosophical activities. But there are many people such as political scientists, sociologists, economists who do very important work in philosophy too. Think of Amartya Sen who enters into philosophical debates. At most conferences I attend there are people from three or four different disciplines all talking about the same things that philosophers do. But Sen has an orientation which is distinctively that of an economist. Both Rawls and Sen shed new light on the subject. Sen knows more about economics than Rawls does but Rawls knows more about the history of moral philosophy than Sen does. To shorten that answer, I don’t think we should worry about what a philosopher *qua* philosopher should do. What we should worry about is coming to grips with normative ethical questions in a clear, informative and reflective way.

Gnosis: *As a pragmatist, you advocate the end of what Richard Rorty has dubbed capital-P Philosophy. To what future can post-Philosophical departments of philosophy look towards?*

KN: I want to begin by pointing out, and Rorty would say the same thing, that I'm not making predictions. I don't know – or even have a good conjecture – about how philosophy will develop. I'm only saying how I hope it will and I hope my hopes are not so unrealistic that I'm just spitting into the wind. Having said that, I can express my hopes and I contend they're not unreasonable hopes. I think that philosophy should become what Rorty calls small-p philosophy. We should free ourselves from the grip of the metaphysical tradition: free ourselves in a way that is stronger than what Hilary Putnam and Stanley Cavell will sanction. They argue that while all these questions are nonsensical we should still think about them regardless. I'm like Rorty, "if they're nonsensical, there nonsensical". If you can't say it, you can't say it, and you can't whistle it either. You should put such matters aside. Why wallow in nonsense? Still, people need to know the history of these topics. But they should be treated how in an atheistic society we would talk about Christianity or Judaism. So there I'm very much on Rorty's side. And I think that if that's right, and you've got enough consensus about it from the philosophical and academic community, then philosophical education should be changed considerably. I think you should have less training in the history of metaphysics and epistemology – fewer courses in epistemology, even if it's naturalized Quineian epistemology which as far as I can see is just psychology, to say nothing of foundationalist epistemology. Those things seem to me to be a complete waste of time, and there's no need to go on with them *if* there's a firm consensus about this among philosophers. If there's no consensus then I'm just being dogmatic in trying to force a view on people. I wouldn't do that even if I could, but I could hope in time for this sort of consensus. But then what would philosophy look like? Well, it would still be part of the tradition. We would still need to dwell on the history of philosophy, particularly with emphasis on the history of moral and social philosophy. I think that we should give less attention to logic, except for the most elementary forms of logic. In my view logic should move over to the mathematics department. Philosophers should be trained so that they know something about figures like Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Pareto, not just Pareto Optimality but Pareto. They should have that kind of training and still have training in attempting to state things clearly and precisely. We philosophers can make a fetish about that but if you come across some really foggy people – as you sometimes do in philosophy as elsewhere – you don't know what the devil they're talking about. And we need philosophers

who have developed a kind of clarity. But I don't think they need to have logic to develop clarity. Most lawyers don't have logic and can be very clear – so I would think that a philosophy department should drop epistemology, metaphysics, downplay logic – not drop it – pay more attention to the relationship between philosophy, the social sciences and history. Philosophers should know something. They should know something about history, their society, about economics, and about the natural sciences. They should know, for example, to an extent any of us can know about it, how the capitalist system works. They should know something about what it was like to live in the Middle Ages. They should know something about anthropology, which is extremely relevant when you talk about relativism, for example, and how very, very different people were and are. They should also pay attention – certainly Martha Nussbaum teaches this – to literature. Most philosophers don't have very much education in that. They spend too much time thinking about sense data and physicalism, and I think that should quietly come to an end. I don't think, however, there's much chance that philosophy will change that way – but maybe it will. One of the things that I'm impressed by is seeing how students, before they get too professionalized, have a wide set of interests. Furthermore philosophy students, or most of them, still want to be clear, informed, and professionalized. I sound like I'm talking against being professionalized. I want people to know their Quine, to know their Davidson, to know how to argue. But I'm also concerned what they argue about. And I think that's the way philosophy should go. I'm not particularly sanguine to think that it will go that way.

Gnosis: *You seem to enjoy teaching and being a professor. What's the fun stuff that you take home at the end of the day about this profession? (Aspiring professors want to know.)*

KN: I'm glad you asked me that question. I do care about what I'm doing. I'm not sure that 'fun stuff' is the word, but maybe it is. I want to do things that intrigue me, that I like, that seem worthwhile doing. And that are not boring. I think it was either Peirce, or Putnam who said that for philosophy to be good it has to be boring. And that I don't believe for a minute, though it should be demanding. But in a wide sense I want it to be 'fun stuff', and I do find it fun. When I finish a class I normally come home and cook, and I like to cook very much – I think I'm pretty good at it. And, as I cook, I think about what I'm doing in class and what I've been saying and reflect on this, reflect on what students said and what I said in response and what I should have said and what I didn't say. I cook, I think about

philosophy, I listen – more or less as something in the background – to music. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and think about discussions in class. For me this, strangely enough, is fun stuff. That and that I get to teach what I want. I used to have to teach logic and I was always bored beyond belief. Aspiring professors reading this won't be so lucky as to usually teach what they want. You'll have to start off teaching what the department assigns you. But that's not always so bad. When I taught at NYU and Calgary I always taught the elementary ethics and problems of philosophy courses and I liked it a lot. My big uncompleted manuscript *The Claims of Morality* grew out of twelve years of teaching these courses. Maybe one day it will turn into something publishable. I always liked teaching about hedonism and the freewill/determinism problems. I taught them so often that I would always wait for those spots where students would make mistakes, and where they would improve on these mistakes. Indeed, sometimes they would say something new. I've always liked making students think critically about claims that were to them totally obvious, and make them aware how unobvious they really are, such as when a student says "Morality is just opinion. Mine is different than yours and there's no way to argue for them." You have to make them question these things without just rendering them silly questions or dialectic illusions; you have to show what real problems are behind these things. This may sound elitist, but when I teach, I never teach for the dumbest students. When I have a class of about 200 students I know most of them don't even want to be there, they just have to. This is more the case in the American system. I teach for the students who care, and do so in a way that does not punish those that don't. I always thought teaching those big intro classes was fun, but I'm glad I'm not doing it now.