

# REPLY TO ROBERT SINCLAIR

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I want now to turn to Robert Sinclair, who searchingly considers what he charitably calls “a tension” in my conception of philosophy. He specifies it carefully, shows its importance, and goes on to show how he thinks I can and should extricate myself from the difficulties it presents.

The crucial tension he has in mind, to put it in my way, is between my Wittgensteinian metaphilosophy—what I once called my anti-Philosophy philosophy—and my pragmatic naturalism: my concern with philosophy reconstructing itself into concerning itself with the problems of human beings rather than the problems of Philosophy. He argues that I should stick with my Deweyan naturalistic pragmatism and drop my negative therapeutic philosophy. I don’t want to drop either, and I don’t think I have to. But I want certainly to keep my Deweyan stress on philosophy as social criticism—sometimes called a “criticism of criticisms”—as centrally concerning itself with social, political, and cultural problems of human beings and to setting these problems in their proper contexts. My take on John Dewey is the once (but now no longer) standard one that Sinclair accurately describes. I first read Dewey by reading the mammoth collection of his work called *Intelligence in the Modern World* while I was floating around the Pacific during World War II as a rather disoriented and inefficient deck third officer in the US Merchant Marine. I had no idea that I would end up studying philosophy nor did I have any previous reading of philosophy but I lugged along the Modern Library editions of Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, George Santayana, and John Dewey. I was struck by all of them, but by Dewey the most, and as I later, as a beginning graduate student, read more Dewey and his then standard com-

mentators Sidney Hook and Ernest Nagel, I imbibed the reading of Dewey which I still retain and which Sinclair accurately articulates.

I hope Sinclair is right and that I should resolve the tension—if there is one—in the Deweyan way he advocates. I say this honestly with no attempt to be cute or paternalistic. Dewey is often thought to be fuzzy. But what he says can be clearly articulated, and his *pragmatic* naturalism, with its stress on social criticism, is a powerful and plausible conception of philosophy that would make sense to many people who would otherwise not find philosophy making much sense or, to the extent they can make sense of it, find it a little game with no clear point. So I hope it has the power that Sinclair finds in it. I am however ambivalent about this, though with *Naturalism without Foundations* and *Naturalism and Religion*, I have become less ambivalent. I sometimes think Sinclair is right on the mark.

## II

I will here gesture at some of the reasons why I am ambivalent.

1. How is it that *philosophy* is capable of contributing to the resolution of our current moral and social problems? Before the “demise of the tradition” we had a conception of Philosophy, which taught us that there was something substantive that we philosophers could know by studying philosophy, that, as Richard Rorty puts it, no one else knows so well. There was the conviction that philosophers had a special critical perch—as a result of their distinctive Philosophical knowledge—that would enable them to criticize beliefs and practices with a special expertise and authority. If we could just come to understand something like the Kantian critical philosophy we could pull it off. But that hope goes with the “demise of the tradition.” And note this does not entail or require bugbear of general skepticism. We have no trouble with knowing the sun will rise tomorrow.

2. What special or even unusual expertise do Philosophers have for dealing with our moral and otherwise social problems? Well, we—or at least some of us—can think clearly and critically. But so can lots of others—among them lawyers, economists, scientists, some journalists, and not infrequently just plain folk who read a lot and ruminate. (And maybe some who just ruminate.) Just what expertise do we—if you will, *qua* philosophers—have that, say, a good interpretive journalist doesn’t have or a good social historian doesn’t have, to do social critique and analysis? Perhaps the shoe is on the other foot. (Here relate this with what I said in response to Rorty.) Don’t we kid ourselves here?

3. Sinclair remarks: “By urging that philosophy has no distinct role for helping deal with social and moral issues, we are seemingly led to the further claim that philosophy lacks any special ability to deal with humanity’s problems.” And this is exactly what I tend to think when I am in a Wittgensteinian or logical positivist mood, or sometimes when I shave before the mirror.

I have, for example, written about cosmopolitanism, nationalism, secession, globalization, and imperialism. I am interested in those problems; they grip me as human problems and I care very much about whether we—that is, anyone, philosopher or not—can come to say something that approximates as much as we can (on some charitable reading of that that is compatible with antirepresentationalism) a “telling it like it is.” But I ask what expertise (if any) do we philosophers have here beyond drawing some distinctions and clarifying some concepts. I don’t say that is useless, but it doesn’t carry us very far.

In writing on globalization and imperialism and on their link, and in giving seminars on these topics, I found myself struggling with a literature and a growing proliferation of issues that I had doubts that I could handle. Globalization and imperialism cry out for analysis and critique. It is crucial for us intellectuals and for people more generally, to know how to view things here and what is to be done about these things. Yet it is not to be evasive or to “chicken out” to feel that one does not know enough. And, unlike Gilbert Ryle, I do not believe it sufficient to chat up some expert at our equivalent High Table and then retreat to our studies and reflect on these things and then write about them. I distrust the native sagacities and capabilities of philosophers to enlighten us.

I have also written principally vis-à-vis Quebec—with *some* resonances for Scotland, Wales, Belgium, and Catalonia—about nationalism and secession. And I hope, at least in the case of Quebec, I have said something sensible and close to being warrantably assertible. Many people think I have not. But if I were to generalize about nationalism and secession—taking in the Balkans, the different nationalities in the old Soviet Union or in Asia—beyond uttering some truism that all peoples in some way should have the right to self-determination, I would have to recycle myself as some kind of social scientist or an interpretive journalist. I don’t see anything in our philosophical training that would give us any expertise (beyond the ability to make distinctions to set out clearly an argument, something not to be despised) that would be of much help. Some might say, “And that’s enough.” The trouble is, it isn’t. I remember—I think it was in 1976, when I was a visiting professor at the University of Ottawa—attending a yearlong faculty seminar at Carleton on development and development theory. I was the only philosopher; the rest were a young but a distinguished bunch of political economists, political scientists, and sociologists from all over Ontario. At the first session I was of some help on differentiating uses of “development,” but after that, though I was fascinated and informed by the discussions, I had little to contribute. Aren’t we philosophers paying ourselves perhaps an undeserved compliment in speaking of a division of labor here? What is “our labor” beyond calling attention to what Wittgenstein called “stale truisms,” particularly where people (implicitly or explicitly) end up trying over these issues to do Philosophy? Don’t we end up mouthing nonsense or giving forth with truisms that only someone in a metaphysical tangle needs to be reminded of?

Perhaps all we can do, if we would go somewhat in a Deweyan way and not be content to write “just so stories,” is to do something like what Edward Said, Jean-Paul Sartre (at times), and Noam Chomsky have done so well as critical intellectuals, namely, to try to speak truth (warranted assertability) to power. But here it is instructive to consider the case of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre wrote plays and novels and he wrote about colonialism. He said things there that are gripping and make you reflect, and ditto for de Beauvoir’s novels and her four-volume autobiography—writings that are often compelling and usually instructive. The same thing is true for her *Second Sex* and her hefty volume on old age. I have learned a lot from those writings, and cherish them—particularly de Beauvoir’s. They help us see some of the things that must be done, but there is little there that is philosophical, and what there is that is specifically Philosophical is bad regurgitating of the pompous nonsense of *Being and Nothingness*. When Philosophy occasionally intrudes, it just gets in the way of the other insightful stuff. It’s like Tolstoy’s discussion of freedom and determinism in *War and Peace*. And would it have been better if Sartre and de Beauvoir had grown up and had been educated on the other side of the Channel? We might have been spared some metaphysical obscurities, but then we might have lost some links with literature. On neither shore, with neither style of Philosophizing, was there an expertise that would help us be critics of society—would help us do the Deweyan thing that Sinclair well describes.

### III

Sinclair well describes my pragmatic naturalism and shows how indebted it is to Dewey’s work and how it, he has it, does well the critical job I say that Philosophy may not be able to—perhaps cannot—do. He shows accurately in a succinct paragraph what my critical theory comes to, how it fits cohesively with a Deweyan “problems of life philosophy,” and how, if the way I have construed critical theory is asking for too much, the Deweyan approach is capable of standing on its own feet even if we eschew critical theory. These approaches show, as Sinclair puts it, that “we can reject the pretensions of the philosophical tradition, while still affirming that philosophy plays a distinctive role in reflecting on the resources now available in helping cope with our current problems.” He argues that I show that and that my philosophical practice itself undermines the negative view fostered by my critique of the Tradition.

In much of my early metaphilosophical work (and prominently in Jocelyne Couture’s and my long introduction to our collection, *Métaphilosophie*) we ourselves were concerned with extensively with the problem of demarcation: how clearly to distinguish philosophy from other activities, how to say what is distinctive about philosophy. I didn’t then see that as an impossible essentialist task, and an unnecessary one at that. Yet why, after all, should there be anything distinctive that philosophers do that sets them off from others? Sinclair eschews

this essentialist hunt. There are nonetheless some things—many things—that philosophers typically do. Dewey settled on—though that was not the only interesting thing he settled on—taking philosophy as social critique, as coming to grips with the moral, political, social, and cultural problems of human beings, and he further argued concerning how to use what he called the scientific method—what alternatively he called the experimental method—in coming to grips with the problems of life. Not since my early days as a graduate student have I thought you could do the latter. I think it is a very suggestive and hopeful suggestion, but nowhere has it been carried out and we have no clear idea of how to carry it out or that there is something that is the scientific method. That we can deploy *philosophy as social critique* (pace Dewey) is another matter. Using the scientific method in the domain of morals is deeply problematic. It hasn't been established that somehow philosophy construed as applying scientific method to morality and to normative matters more generally is the only or even the best method of social critique. It may even be pretty much a failure here. Perhaps reflective equilibrium is the better method or perhaps no one method is the best. Perhaps it is better that we deploy no method at all. Remember in this context Paul Feyerabend. Don't just take him as a crazy. He wasn't. It has not been shown that only *the* scientific method (if we knew what that is) is to be used here. However, against my anti-Philosophy philosophy, it should be said to look at what has been done in the last twenty-five years. John Rawls has at least arguably shown how political liberalism can be shown to have a coherent rationale and how it should view and treat decent nonliberal hierarchical societies. Ronald Dworkin has given us a reasonable way to view abortion. Norman Daniels has shown us how to view certain key problems in medical ethics. Joshua Cohen has had significant things to say about democracy, Martha Nussbaum about cosmopolitanism, and Henry Shue about global justice. They are all philosophers who in a critical way address the problems of human beings. They are probably each in one way or another mistaken or partially mistaken. After all, fallibilism is the name of the game. But they have given accounts that are useful, careful, thoughtful, well argued, not dismissive of fact, and have a human importance. How do I get off saying that philosophers can't do what they have done? I should drop the Wittgensteinian therapy stuff where it applies to philosophy and utilize it only against Philosophy, that is, against metaphysics, epistemology, and metaethics (old or new), and otherwise stick with a Deweyan pragmatic naturalism, and that is exactly what I intend to do and I think I have done. With that there is no tension of the sort that Sinclair claims. I can have my Wittgenstein and Dewey too. If that is eclecticism, then so be it.

Sinclair is right in seeing that this is pretty much what I do. But I have given reasons for ambivalence. It is not so evident that we can do the Dewey thing. Let me now give one more twist to the screw that turns on some things in the last quarter of Sinclair's essay. Sinclair points out that my naturalism, as well as Dewey's, Hook's, and Nagel's naturalisms, is importantly different

from the naturalism of contemporary naturalists. In many American Philosophical Association presidential addresses in recent years their authors have announced themselves as naturalists. Sinclair points correctly to the "striking difference between Nielsen's social naturalism, which takes social and moral issues as central to its mandate, and other broadly Quinean inspired forms of naturalism, which rarely address such issues, and instead focus solely on issues in epistemology and the philosophy of science." In the conference during which he read a first version of his paper, he remarked: "In adopting many of the features of naturalism given us by such philosophers as John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Ernest Nagel, Nielsen is himself engaged in the distinct philosophical task of specifying a vision, full of values and beliefs, directed at a specific way of life." But remember Hilary Putnam about Pabulum and a philosophy that tries to be all vision. Moreover, and again rightly, there is a fundamental difference between what philosophy is capable of my naturalism and the typical contemporary naturalism. Sinclair goes on to remark, "and this in turn demonstrates a difference over what role science can play in helping with social and moral issues."

It is true that in the older pragmatist conceptions of naturalism as well as in mine there is a different conception than that of most contemporary naturalists of the social utility of science. Philosophy for the classical naturalistic pragmatists utilizes the resources of science and even more crucially what it takes to be the method of science to be crucial to the improvement of human life. But the recognition of this does not mean that science, taken by itself, most clearly natural science, is not morally neutral. It is people, principally scientists, but sometimes scientists at the behest of their bosses, who utilize science for distinctive political or ideological purposes. Progressive people will utilize science in the way Dewey would have approved. But fascists and the administration of George W. Bush utilize science too. After all, we didn't have to invent or develop the atomic bomb. That was not something built into the structure of science. The atomic bomb or even the discovery that such a thing was possible didn't just scientifically have to come to be. What research is carried out depends on what we are interested in and what resources are at our disposal. But science itself is in the above way arguably value free. Here Max Weber was right.

The value freedom of science is a very complicated matter and Weber gave a very nuanced account of it, much more nuanced than is usually thought. It is complicated by the fact, something that Dewey recognized and stressed though not very clearly, that there is no fact/value dichotomy: fact and value are inextricably entangled. Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in the mid-twentieth century saw this, and John Searle, Isaiah Berlin, Hilary Putnam, and Thomas Scanlon later saw it with even greater clarity.

However, this metaethical reality does not, I think, make it the case that science itself is not morally neutral and Weber's campaign against moralizing scientists, particularly social scientists, stands. Against such a background it is not surprising that much contemporary naturalism would be so evaluatively

austere. This circles back to the first criticisms I made of a Deweyan conception of social critique. It is clear enough—frighteningly clear—how science itself can be used normatively and how it can be used to criticize certain social policies and even whole social orders. But that is a *utilizing* of science, not something built into the very structure of science. There is an ambiguity in “the social irrelevance of science”: (1) It can be taken that *in itself* a scientific hypothesis or other purely scientific statement does not take sides on moral or other social issues; and (2) alternatively, it can be taken that a scientific claim does not have a bearing on moral or other issues. If (2) is what is meant by the social irrelevance of science, then it is plainly false. If it is a scientific fact or even a reasonable scientific possibility that the SARS virus was passed on to humans by a certain species of monkey widely eaten in China or that 60 percent of the forests in Canada are intact or that global warming is increasing at such and such a rate, then those scientific claims are of obvious social relevance to human beings not because of the statements themselves but because of the harmful or beneficial consequences their warrantedness will have (or will probably have) on human populations or on the earth. But their warrantedness is one thing; their harmfulness or nonharmfulness another. That was a point that Weber rightfully insisted upon.

Science can sometimes play a role in helping with society’s practices. If the claim about SARS is true or probable and it leads to a ban on the eating of such monkeys, then people in the monkey-eating society or societies and indeed elsewhere will be better off. A naturalism that denies this will be saying something false, though it could say, and indeed should say, that it rests on a political decision informed by scientific knowledge and not on a scientific one. And this will be as true for a Gibbardish Gallilean austere scientifically oriented naturalism as for any other. It doesn’t matter whether science or scientific practitioners have an *inherent* responsibility built in to the very structure of science or just a responsibility as moral beings to avoid what are, everything considered, the harmful consequences of something scientifically discoverable or scientifically created where they can be avoided. Science does not exist in a social vacuum. Science often can be used for either human weal or woe. A philosophy (pace Dewey) that utilizes the resources of science need not be a philosophy that is socially relevant and socially responsible, but it can be.<sup>1</sup> And therein lies the importance (or a good bit of the importance) of science for human beings. But that it is so used rests on a moral choice that is not—or at least so I think—rooted in science or scientific method itself. However, it is an obvious choice favoring the old naturalism. Moreover, there is no reason that the more austere Gallilean contemporary naturalists such as Allan Gibbard can’t make such choices themselves. Only it wouldn’t be, as I see and they see it, a scientific choice, though it could be a choice *causally* rooted in science. In the first sense of “social irrelevance of science” a choice either way is not a scientific choice. And the *method* of science is not being deployed in making such a choice. But this does not justify the claim that philosophy can have no spe-

cial role to help in coping with society's problems. It only suggests that Dewey's way of reasoning about it is not always appropriate.

Sinclair's basic challenge is that there is a tension in my work between how I apply Wittgensteinian therapy and my Deweyan pragmatic naturalism. There is not, for I apply Wittgensteinian therapy to *Philosophy* and not to *philosophy* and the pragmatic naturalism I defend only involves *philosophy*. However, I have not articulated that clearly enough in the past and I am grateful to Sinclair for in effect pointing that out. As an exegetical point about Dewey, he did *philosophy* superbly but sometimes wandered into *Philosophy*. I excise the latter from my pragmatic naturalism.

## NOTE

1. After all, the Nazis made an extensive and powerful but selective use of science, but they put much of that use to very evil ends.