

The Absence of "Engagement"

A Reply to M. Guénancia

Michael Rosen

Merton College

Oxford

31st December 1984

## I

As M. <sup>e</sup>Gunancia rightly says, the question of the relationship between philosophy and politics is not one but several different questions -- questions which range from the huge to the relatively trivial.

And, what is worse, some of the largest of them have only relatively trivial answers. Does politics presuppose philosophy? In one way, clearly, yes: it is the merest commonplace that philosophy has persistently found its way into the heart of Western thought about politics. Although few of his successors have gone so far as Plato himself in assuming a fundamental identity between the problem of the well-ordered society and that of the single individual, the continuing dependence of political philosophy on preconceptions about human nature -- of the capacities of the human mind and the possibilities of human action -- and the dependence of these preconceptions, in turn, on doctrines taken from metaphysics, epistemology or the philosophy of language, have ensured that it has always been possible to trace a line from political theory to philosophical assumptions and commitments. And this remains true even for those theorists -- Marxists such as Althusser or anti-Marxists such as Popper -- who have been sceptical about attempts to embody in political theory a theory of human nature at all. In their case the philosophical presuppositions are not eliminated by the move away from a conception of human nature; rather, they immediately reappear as part of the problem of method with which any such attempt to realign political theory inevitably finds itself faced.

But, if philosophical issues have always been a part of what is at work in political theory, they have always been just that, a part. Discouragingly, perhaps, it seems that the more interesting question of how politics presupposes philosophy admits of no useful general answer. It is simply not the case that the connection between political theory and metaphysical doctrine has remained constant either in location or degree. The relationship between philosophy and politics is not the same for Plato as it is for Hegel -- much less so for Voltaire or yet again Marx. Each significant author appears to generate a distinctive network of dependencies and oppositions within which he operates.

Turning now to the corresponding question at the other extreme -- the constraints which politics place on philosophy -- the situation is very similar. Again, it is undeniable that there have always been such constraints, although a certain self-image -- what Marx called "ideological consciousness" -- has made philosophers absurdly reluctant to acknowledge their existence. But here, too, (whatever Marx may have claimed in his more "vulgar-Marxist" moments) there appear to be no significant generalizations to be made about their nature, form or extent. Let us admit that the confidence and independence of the rising European bourgeoisie gave a significant impetus to the formation of the Kantian philosophy -- and that this political impulse leaves traces even in surprisingly abstract doctrines of Kant's. Still there remains the limitation of such a political "reading" which Sartre identified in his famous aphorism: "It is true that Valéry was a petit-bourgeois intellectual; but not every petit-bourgeois intellectual was

Valéry". That is the limitation of reductionism. Politics is a part of the story of philosophy; but it is not the whole story.

So, if we are to give answers to questions concerning the relationship between politics and philosophy more interesting than such banal generalities, it is necessary, it seems to me, to adopt tactics of particularization and specification. In making my own selection I have been guided by the subject of this colloquium and the contribution of M. Guenancia. The central question I have in mind is how far -- and also why -- have the relations between politics and philosophy proved different in Britain and France? M. Guenancia's paper clearly makes such questions inescapable: the Anglo-Saxon political philosopher, faced with a discussion of the "notion of engagement" must surely reflect on the almost complete absence of this concept, so central, as we know, to the French discussion, from our own intellectual scene.

In what follows I shall suggest two kinds of reason for this absence:

- (1) There are, first, political reasons for the limited impact in Britain of the Existentialist movement and the absence of any indigenous movement to compare with it.
- (2) Second, there is the philosophical context in which the concept of engagement emerged. French philosophers turned to the notion of engagement as part of their dissatisfaction with certain attempts at the solution of traditional philosophical problems. This move has seemed less compelling to Anglo-Saxon philosophers, I

shall argue, because they have approached those same problems in a quite different way.

## II

I have called the absence of the concept of engagement "almost complete". But I do not wish this to be misunderstood. It is not, one must say, that the British have lacked their committed intellectuals. Most of us carry with us the image of Bertrand Russell in the 1950s, passionate and austere, addressing crowds in Trafalgar Square in the cause of disarmament; and this image has been supplemented in more recent times by that of the historian, Prof. Edward Thompson, writing and speaking with almost incredible energy on behalf of a renewed CND. Yet it remains the case that it is to France that the British have looked as the home of the committed intellectual. Rightly or wrongly, the political intellectual has always seemed an exception to the British while we still imagine it to be the norm in France.

But what is indisputable is that, in thinking about the role of the intellectual in politics, the concept of engagement has played practically no role in Britain -- and one reason for this has been the absence of certain political factors which were a potent ingredient in the success of the Existentialist movement in Continental Europe. Behind Existentialism's great vogue lay a correspondence between the radical dimension of its philosophy and the drastic political upheavals endured by those Europeans over whose territory a brutal land war was

fought out. The German writer Dieter Wellershoff, in an essay exploring the roots of contemporary German politics, gives what seems to me a most perceptive account of this correspondence. Wellershoff contrasts the situation of post-war Germans with that of the English and Americans. He points out the devastating political experiences which the French and the Germans both suffered and argues that this predisposed them to sympathy for a certain set of philosophical doctrines:

[The French] knew defeat, knew life under occupation, and had also experienced the veiled character of political convictions as they were exposed in changes of power. The experiences were similar to those of the Germans, who with the French were disposed to a theoretical fascination with so-called extreme situations. They called it the philosophy of existence. For this philosophy, freedom consisted in proceeding from nothingness or, as it was said, in "abiding" in it. What could at that time be experienced was existence. One of the more advanced students explained it to me in the following way: Existence is what remains once you have lost everything that belonged to your social personality. You have a house, it burns down; you have a family, they're shot; you are driven from your homeland; you lose your arms and legs; you become blind -- and yet you still have the firm, unshakable conviction that everything lost was external. This irreducible core is existence.

(D. Wellershoff, "Germany -a State of Flux",

in Observations on "The Spiritual Situation of the Age", ed. by J. Habermas, (Cambridge, Ma.:MIT Press, 1984)pp.335-368, pp352-3.)

To follow Wellershoff, then, Existentialism represented for the Continental Europeans the self-affirmation of the disinherited, the refugee. In Britain, by contrast, the effects of the Second World War were to prove surprisingly conservative. Not having been invaded, not having been defeated, the lesson appeared to be that the old social structure had stood up to the test. (Think only of Marc Bloch's Strange Defeat for the contrasting attitude in France.) Despite great suffering, what held Britons together was seen to have been strong enough to survive an extreme threat, a threat which made even the reforms of the post-war Labour government seem moderate by contrast. Quite radical political change (compare again the experience of French tripartisme) became possible within the political consensus. If President Pompidou's famous dictum had some validity -- that "France is probably the only country in the world in which every serious political crisis poses the problem of institutions"--the British emerged from the war with a dangerous legacy of political self-satisfaction which subsequent traumas -- the loss of Empire, Suez, relative economic decline -- failed to dispel.

Such impact as Existentialism did make in Britain was in the nature of an aesthetic fad rather than a movement of political significance. Sartre (with Camus and Malraux) was taken to be a literary figure with eccentric other interests; Merleau-Ponty was, to all intents and purposes,

unknown. To the extent that the ideas of the Existentialists came before a wider audience this was mostly the work of a best-seller: Colin Wilson's The Outsider, a book which it is now, I think, impossible to reread without embarrassment at the way in which serious ideas of considerable complexity are reduced to the level of adolescent Romanticism. Significantly, when an anti-Establishment intellectual movement did, in fact, emerge in Britain, it differed considerably from Existentialism: the Angry Young Men of the 1950s were, by and large, political and aesthetic realists, concerned to depict (if also to protest against) social conditions which they saw as stifling; they were not, however, tempted to deny or underestimate their power.

### III

If the intellectual dimension of Existentialism remained more or less unknown to the British public, neither did its philosophical preoccupations seem compelling to those (relatively few) philosophers who knew something about them. For the Existentialists -- and in this case I refer both to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty -- approached traditional problems of epistemology from within a perspective which Anglo-Saxon philosophers believed themselves (rightly or wrongly) to have gone beyond.

Fundamental to both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty is that traditional problem of epistemology, the problem of the external world; specifically, the problem of whether a consciousness which has direct access to the content of its own awareness is not, at the same time, forced into



scepticism about the existence of an objective, external world. This problem was, of course, one which was recognized by philosophers on the other side of the Channel. But, despite some measure of agreement on the issues at stake, there existed a fundamental gulf between the approach of the phenomenologically-inspired French writers and that of the English philosophers of language.

Agreement first:

Both sides believed that one reason why the problem of the existence of the external world had proved to be so difficult for past philosophers was that it had been posed in terms of an unsatisfactory account of the nature of thought and meaning; a more satisfactory account would lead to the dissolution of the problem in anything like its traditional form.

Now to the disagreement:

A -- very compressed and necessarily over-simplified -- version of the English view of the problem might go as follows. Let us start by asking the question: What is a thought a thought of? The natural answer is to say that it is a thought about the world. But, if this is our answer, then we are faced with a further problem: How is it that we can have thoughts about objects -- the unicorn outside the window -- and states of affairs -- the arrival of a letter telling me I have won £1 million on the Football Pools -- to which nothing in the real world, regrettably, corresponds? If we make a common response at this point and say that they are not about

the unicorn itself or the actual arrival of my letter but about the idea of the unicorn or the idea of the arrival of the letter, then we appear to have been forced out of a natural attitude of realism -- thought is about the world -- into an uncomfortable idealism -- thought is about an intermediary realm whose relations to the real world must, evidently, be problematic. But how can this move be avoided?

To analytical philosophers, following Frege and Russell, it seemed that it had become possible simply to bypass this whole problem. Their claim was that, although those terms which refer are indeed, as realism would suggest, about the real world, those other terms, nevertheless, which have meaning but do not refer to anything in the real world are not, in fact, referring to something other than the real world. They are not referring terms at all, and thus, in that sense, not about anything. The crucial claim is that, surface appearances notwithstanding, not all words mean by being about something. When this is shown (by analysis) the need to postulate an intermediary realm as a way of ensuring that significant speech has something to be about simply disappears -- and with it (if one follows the argument) the medium on which epistemological scepticism depends. "The seventeenth-century idea idea" -- the phrase is Quine's -- depended, the analytical philosophers believed, on a bad theory of reference; change the theory and the entire "mental museum" (Quine's phrase again) could be abolished.

Contrast now the approach taken by Sartre to the

same problem.

For Sartre -- as for Merleau-Ponty -- the starting point is the commitment to Husserl's thesis of intentionality: all consciousness is consciousness of something. As is well known, Husserl calls this intending act of consciousness a noesis, and its object -- mysteriously and controversially -- the noema. The problem is: What is the status of this noema? To which realm does it belong? The real world or the world of ideas?

Now, the orthodox Husserlian will, very likely, argue that objections and questions of this sort are out of place in phenomenology: that phenomenology, based on a procedure of "reduction", aims at descriptions of phenomena from which, quite deliberately, questions of existence have been "bracketed out". But, whether one considers this, ultimately, to be a legitimate response or not, it is important to note that this is not the way in which Sartre understands Husserl. In Sartre's view, Husserl does, indeed, fall into the trap of idealism.

He says:

... from the moment that [Husserl] makes of the noema an unreal, a correlate of the noesis, a noema whose esse is percipi, he is totally unfaithful to his principle.

(J.-P. Sartre, Being and Nothingness  
(London: Methuen, 1958), p.xxxvii)

Against this, Sartre himself is prepared to assert a relationship between consciousness and a reality other than consciousness:

Consciousness is consciousness of something. This means that transcendence is the constitutive structure of consciousness; that is, that consciousness is born supported by a being which is not itself. This is what we call the ontological proof.

(Being and Nothingness, p.xxxvii)

Sartre rejects the idealist move which would say of things that they are, in some sense, "in" consciousness: A table is not in consciousness -- not even in the capacity of a representation. A table is in space, beside the window, etc.

(Being and Nothingness, p.xxvii)

Of course, Sartre does realize that this rejection of idealism may seem no more than a verbal assertion. As he admits: "No doubt someone will reply that the existence of the demand of consciousness does not prove that this demand ought to be satisfied". "But", he counters, "this objection cannot hold up against an analysis of what Husserl calls intentionality, though, to be sure, he misunderstood its essential character". (Being and Nothingness, p.xxxvii)

It is at this point that he makes what is evidently his crucial argument. It is, he claims, only the concentration on the reflective consciousness of knowledge -- the "illusion of the primacy of knowledge", Sartre calls it -- which creates that opposition of knower and known which lies behind scepticism:

The reduction of consciousness to knowledge in fact involves our introducing into consciousness the subject--object dualism which is typical of know-

ledge.

(Being and Nothingness, p.xxviii)

For the pre-reflective awareness -- the level of being, as Sartre calls it (somewhat inconsistently with Heidegger's use of the term) -- the relationship of consciousness to what is given through it is immediate and unchallengeable. Thus the problem becomes not how a self-sufficient "knowing subject" could "reach out" to the world, but how consciousness intends the world at a level which may be "covered over" for the individual:

...reflection has no kind of primacy over the consciousness reflected-on. It is not reflection which reveals the consciousness reflected-on to itself. Quite the contrary, it is the non-reflective consciousness which renders the reflection possible; there is a pre-reflective cogito which is the condition of the Cartesian cogito.

(Being and Nothingness, p.xxix)

This -- all too Fichtean -- attempt to overcome idealism by taking consciousness down to a level beneath that of reflection then becomes the key to a whole series of distinctive and characteristic Sartrean doctrines. In particular, since it is my consciousness which is at work on the pre-reflective level -- even if, at another level, I am prepared to ignore or deny it -- this epistemological doctrine comes, for Sartre, to have a psychological and political point in the doctrine of "bad faith":

... consciousness affects itself with bad faith. There must be an original intention and a project of bad faith; this project implies a comprehension

of bad faith as such and a pre-reflective apprehension of consciousness as affecting itself with bad faith. It follows first that the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived.

(Being and Nothingness, p.49)

Thus it is apparent that the concept of engagement as it emerged through the writings of the Existentialists has an important ingredient of "politics for philosophy's sake". In this it is in many ways exemplary for the kind of relationship there has been between philosophy and politics in the Western tradition. We start with a philosophical problem -- that of the relationship of mind and world -- and move to a philosophical doctrine -- that of the pre-reflective being of consciousness -- for its solution. This doctrine carries, in its turn, what one may call, in the broadest sense, anthropological implications -- the possibility of a dislocation in the structure of consciousness between its most basic activity and the reflective knowledge of that activity; and these implications lead, finally, to a series of ethical and political attitudes of which the notion of engagement is but one.

#### IV

Nevertheless, as I said initially, philosophy is part of the story; it is not the whole story. I do not

wish to imply that the notion of engagement can be reduced to this philosophical impulse which I have traced. My argument is that, to the extent that one of its presuppositions -- the stress on the pre-reflective level of consciousness -- rests on a view of the philosophical problem of scepticism quite different from that taken by Anglo-Saxon philosophers, the concept of engagement has necessarily seemed more alien and less compelling to them.

I certainly do not believe, however, that to point to a philosophical inspiration behind a political concept is to exhaust its function: to the contrary, the "relative autonomy" which concepts of a philosophical origin take on when transported to a political context is fundamental. (Something very similar can be observed when philosophical concepts are transferred to the realm of aesthetics or literary criticism.) The concept of engagement is, in this respect, no exception. As M. Guénancia's paper makes apparent, it has functioned as a point of focus for a number of other problems.

One may note three of them:

(1) The problem of limited self-understanding.

How far do we, as political agents, grasp the significance of the actions we perform, and how far -- and how necessarily -- must such significance escape us?

(2) The nature of political judgement. Are the judgements we make about politics rational in a way which is significantly like -- or significantly unlike -- the

judgements we make about the natural world?

(3) The conflict of values. Must we, faced with the existence of a plurality of moral values, acknowledge that our values amount to no more than a set of irreducibly subjective preferences?

In a sense the concept of engagement could be said to offer a solution to all three of these problems -- it accepts the necessary non-self-transparency of human action, embraces the distinctiveness of political (as against, say, scientific) judgements, and accepts the need for -- possibly tragic -- choice between values.

Yet to the Anglo-Saxon philosopher this may even seem unfortunate: if the concept is itself fundamentally unsatisfactory then it will provide, at best, a pseudo-solution to those other problems which have become assembled under its auspices. So, for example, to see the problem of agents' limited self-understanding as a matter of "non-self-transparency" is to commit oneself to an approach which remains within the limits set by the philosophy of consciousness, when it may be that it is the very alternative set up by the philosophy of consciousness -- Is or is not consciousness self-transparent? -- which is blocking our ability to come to terms with the problem.

But this is not to say that the Anglo-Saxon philosopher would deny the importance of any of these problems taken in themselves -- quite the contrary. Two of them, the problem of the nature of political judgement and the



conflict of values, have been quite fundamental to recent English-language political philosophy. But here too, no less than in France, the context in which these political problems have been discussed has been shaped by a set of philosophical and political presuppositions. The most important and distinctive of these, without doubt, has been its liberal-pluralist orientation.

A certain strand of thought has run through Anglo-Saxon -- and here I include both British and American -- political philosophy from the moral philosophers of the eighteenth century, through the Cold War ideologists of the "end of ideology", to the contemporary "deontological liberalism" associated, above all, with the name of John Rawls. Its common theme has been that the threat to political order posed by the conflict of values comes not from the absence of moral unanimity as such but from fanaticism, ideology or what Hume calls "the poison of enthusiasm" -- in short the belief that any one "conception of the good" (Rawls's phrase) should exercise exclusive domination. At the philosophical level liberal-pluralism has been closely allied first to empiricism, then to positivism -- both philosophies whose theory of judgement maintains a fundamental distinction between moral and political judgement and the truth-oriented discourse of natural science.

Although it would be wrong to deny that this pluralist approach has had its adherents in French thought (from Bayle to Raymond Aron) or to ignore its opponents in Britain and America (of whom, recently, Alasdair MacIntyre

has been, perhaps, the fiercest and most effective) it continues to function more or less as the "dominant ideology" of Anglo-Saxon political thought. At its best it has sought to reconcile the ideals of tolerance and social harmony; its characteristic weaknesses are scepticism and moral complacency.

Yet to assess whether this perspective or that of the concept of engagement provides, ultimately, a more satisfactory context for dealing with political dilemmas would take me beyond what I consider to have been my task here. I realize that I have not demonstrated that the concept of engagement is unsatisfactory or that analytical philosophy of language offers a potentially superior response to the problem of epistemological scepticism. My purpose has been rather different: simply to describe something of the interactions between philosophy and politics in particular cases in order to show the way in which divergences of philosophical presupposition and political experience condition the disagreements between traditions of political thought. I shall consider myself to have succeeded if I have made our <sup>dis</sup>agreements seem somewhat more understandable -- I hardly expect to be able to resolve them.