

Question 94: On Philosophy as Subversion, In Response to Dieter Misgeld

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Dieter Misgeld: A Philosopher's Journey from Hermeneutics to Emancipatory Politics, by Hossein Mesbahian and Trevor Norris (2017), is a book-length transcript of a set of wideranging and extensive conversations with Professor Emeritus Dieter Misgeld. These interviews were conducted in 2005, on the occasion of his retirement from teaching at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The "journey" referenced in the title reflects the sharp distinction between philosophy and politics that appears to inform Misgeld's views throughout the text. In response to Misgeld, I propose that, while his understanding of philosophy as apolitical or quietist arguably holds on a narrow definition of the term "philosophy," this definition forecloses a more radical understanding of philosophy as critique. A deeper and broader conception of philosophy as "theory," I submit, can and should be drawn from the work of first generation Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Properly conceived and undertaken, philosophy as critical theory can and does subvert political power, albeit not in ways that one might predict on the basis of the customary separation of theory and practice. I refer to numerous moments of the discussion to make this case so as to convey the breadth and richness of the book.

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Question 94: On Philosophy as Subversion, in Response to Dieter Misgeld

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Editor's note: Dieter Misgeld was a professor of philosophy of education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education for 35 years. Born in Germany, Misgeld studied philosophy with Gadamer and Habermas before moving to Canada. A version of these remarks was delivered at the launch of *Dieter Misgeld: A Philosopher's Journey from Hermeneutics to Emancipatory Politics* at the meeting of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society in May.

Abstract: Dieter Misgeld: A Philosopher's Journey from Hermeneutics to Emancipatory Politics, by Hossein Mesbahian and Trevor Norris (2017), is a book-length transcript of a set of wide-ranging and extensive conversations with Professor Emeritus Dieter Misgeld. These interviews were conducted in 2005, on the occasion of his retirement from teaching at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The "journey" referenced in the title reflects the sharp distinction between philosophy and politics that appears to inform Misgeld's views throughout the text. In response to Misgeld, I propose that, while his understanding of philosophy as apolitical or quietist arguably holds on a narrow definition of the term "philosophy," this definition forecloses a more radical understanding of philosophy as critique. A deeper and broader conception of philosophy as "theory," I submit, can and should be drawn from the work of first-generation Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Properly conceived and undertaken, philosophy as critical theory can and does subvert political power, albeit not in ways that one might predict on the basis of the customary separation of theory and practice. I refer to numerous moments of the discussion to make this case so as to convey the breadth and richness of the book.

Introduction

Dieter Misgeld: A Philosopher's Journey from Hermeneutics to Emancipatory Politics (Mesbahian & Norris, 2017) not only charts an extraordinary intellectual and political journey, but also marks a singular time and place in the historical development of Western social and political thought, conveyed through the personal reflections of someone who was centrally located in its unfolding. Misgeld's biography is evinced through a series of open-ended interview questions—97 of them, to be exact—conducted in 2005 when he retired from teaching. In the text, we are offered lengthy reflections on his impressions of his teachers and colleagues in Germany, on the character of philosophical discourse both there and in Canada in the late 1960s, and on the political realities of post-war Germany and of late twentieth-century North and Latin America, among many other topics. Readers are thus provided with an

incredibly rich and singularly detailed snapshot of mid-to-late twentieth-century intellectual and political life, and the book is invaluable not least of all for that.

Given the variety and depth of the conversational themes—including thinkers from Heidegger and Gadamer to Adorno, Habermas, Dewey and Rorty, and topics such as third-world politics, post-modernity, human rights and education—it is impossible to do justice to the book’s contents in their entirety. Instead, therefore, I will focus on a theme that lies close to my own heart, namely, the relationship between philosophy—or “theory,” as I prefer to call it, for reasons I will come back to shortly—and politics. I choose this theme because I think the question of the relationship between theory and politics underlies almost all of the discussions in this book at a very deep level, and that, in a certain way, it preoccupied Misgeld throughout his career, even when he seems to have left philosophy behind. Certainly this was clear by 2005, when he said, “I don’t want to work on developing ‘a theory’ of anything anymore, myself, I want to work on realities. Realities of human beings” (p. 53). But by then this had been true for him for a long time.

But that is also a theoretical position, is it not? It is the position that theory is utterly separable from “reality” and that, for this reason, it is at best of limited helpfulness or use. This view is captured in the title of the book itself—“A Philosophical Journey *from* Hermeneutics *to* Emancipatory Politics”—a title that reflects the interviewers’ own quite understandable interest, since they are engaged in philosophical work themselves. But it also suggests by implication (at least) that one might engage in an *apolitical* form of philosophy on the one hand, or in a *non*-theoretical form of politics, on the other. The claim is made explicitly in Misgeld’s answer to question 94, hence the title of the present paper. This discussion occurs in the final chapter of the book, where the interviewers return to the theme of philosophy. Asked about the apparent revolutionary influence and the contestation of political authority effected by such thinkers as Rousseau and Marx, Misgeld opines,

Philosophy can be in a relation of tension to the concentration of political power: that is, it may or might play this role at times, *but there is nothing in the field of inquiry called philosophy by itself that would compel philosophy to take those critical positions.* The question is: could one have critical positions without any element of philosophy in them? I would say, yes, probably one can. Perhaps they might be less forceful. (p. 228–229, emphasis added)

It is this theoretical position that I will discuss, and with which I will take issue, in order to offer a different response to the question of what philosophy can and cannot do than is found in the book.

The Political Nature of Critical Theory

Let me begin by remarking on what is most remarkable: As a young student, Dieter Misgeld was present at, and engaged in, one of the most historically propitious moments of philosophical conversation in the West. This was the moment of post-World War II, 1950s and 60s Western Germany, where he had the opportunity to study with Hans-Georg Gadamer and to participate in Jürgen Habermas’s seminars, where he met Martin Heidegger and Karl Löwith and heard lectures by Theodor Adorno, and when the most pressing question—indeed, the only question, I think, that one could rightly ask—was, how is philosophical work possible in the wake of civilizational catastrophe? How can philosophy go on?

Yet, crucial though it was for the students struggling to make sense of the world in which they found themselves, the question of what philosophy could be or do in the wake of Nazism was *not* the only question being asked. On the contrary, just as the first Chancellor of Germany after the war, Konrad Adenauer, advocated a kind of political amnesia (p. 39–40), many of the older, conservative philosophers, including Gadamer, simply “wanted”—as Misgeld puts it—“to resume the cultural tradition of Germany as if Nazism had not happened” (p. 33). In this, Misgeld goes on to say, they “abandoned the younger people”; they left them “in the dark” to “find ways to understand what had happened” by themselves (p. 34). Nonetheless there were also others, notably the original members of the Frankfurt School and most particularly Adorno, who *were* directly confronting the past, not least by upending the Heidegger School with a scathing critique of its anti-critical, pious language (p. 61), and with a denunciation of its dangerous proximity to the “blood and soil” literature of the Nazis (p. 60).

So Misgeld’s encounter with Adorno appears to have been seismic, since this is someone who *was* actually confronting the past, who *was* identifying the “latent fascism of the Federal Republic” (p. 34), and who was, in Misgeld’s words, “part of a cosmopolitan critical culture which was concerned to have a direct impact on society” (p. 61). Adorno was engaged in a *critical* form of philosophy that was completely different from the philosophy with which Misgeld had been familiar until then. In the Frankfurt School, Misgeld says, he saw a project aimed at producing “a social theory adequate to the times” (p. 124). He explains,

It was a genuine intellectual project, asking what are the realities, how does theory respond to it, what kind of theory is needed, what is [its] relation to the history of theorizing, not just Marx, but Hegel before him, the Enlightenment, the emergence of a post-religious secular consciousness in Western Europe? How would all that be retained so you could have a genuinely progressive development? (p. 125)

These were exactly the right questions, I submit, both then and also now, implicating as they do the entwinement of theory and politics—which is to say, the impossibility of disentangling the theoretical from the political—and highlighting the stakes and the promise of the Enlightenment, which had been so catastrophically abrogated by Nazi ideology and the philosophy that, apparently, attended it.¹

I thus prefer the term “theory” to philosophy because I use it in this explicit, Frankfurtian sense—that is, to denote a *critical* approach to society that can be clearly distinguished from what Max Horkheimer (1937/2002) called “*traditional* theory” and what is variously referred to in the book as “pure philosophy” (p. 49, 77–78, 181). In this context, “pure philosophy” should be taken to mean the foundational, institutionally-bound, disciplinary approach to knowledge and reality that is largely analytical in style in North America and the United Kingdom, that prides itself on its ostensibly unbiased, non-partisan character, and that generally *does* “leave things as they are” (to borrow Misgeld’s phrase), insofar as it assumes a generally quietist approach to politics, and doesn’t even profess “to have an impact” (p. 77). This is the form of philosophizing that Misgeld finds to be of limited use, and that he wanted to leave behind.

¹ I am referring to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. A clarifying discussion of his sympathy with National Socialism appears in the newly available transcript of a conference held in Heidelberg in 1988, to which I return below (Derrida, Gadamer, & Lacoue-Labarthe, 2016). As it happens, this 1988 text went to press at exactly the same time as Heidegger’s infamous “Black Notebooks” of 1931–1938, which also appeared in English in 2016, and which arguably put to rest any remaining doubts about Heidegger’s anti-Semitism.

In contrast to such “pure” or traditional theory—that is, to philosophy in the sense of “*universal theory*” (p. 53)—Horkheimer defined “critical” theory as, above all, self-reflective, socially-located, and politically-engaged. Rather than separating out conceptual frameworks and categories as if they were extrinsic to thought, Horkheimer says, the critical theorist questions theory’s very ground. For theory is itself socially produced, and it reflects specific social relations. In the first place, as he goes on to clarify, so-called “facts” are socially constituted (or “preformed”) in two respects: “through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ” (Horkheimer, 1937/2002, p. 200). And, in the second place, the individual intellectual or theorist him or herself is socially situated as well. In conjunction with his later analysis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002) concerning the abdication of the Enlightenment ethos, therefore, Horkheimer argues that what is needed is “a radical reconsideration, not of the scientist alone, but of the knowing individual as such” (1937/2002, p. 199). In this, following Marx, Horkheimer’s formulation is explicitly materialist. Unlike the thinking that attends the monadic Cartesian ego, Horkheimer claims,

[C]ritical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to the other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature. (p. 211)

From both sides of the subject–object divide, then, the “traditional” split between the theorist and “reality” is put into radical question. And it is on “theory” in this sense—theory as a critical interrogation of so-called political reality—that I want to insist. *Critical* theory so understood cannot be disentangled from politics.

Philosophy as Critique

So critical theory stands in sharp contrast to what Horkheimer calls “traditional theory” and Misgeld calls “pure philosophy,” insofar as it puts both itself and its object (“reality”) into question. It does so, I submit, not because it is another *kind* of philosophy or is undertaken in a different context, but rather because it *is* philosophy, rather than dogma. In other words, what is in contention here is Misgeld’s distinction, in response to question 94, between various forms of philosophy that are purportedly indifferent to “issues of political power or social justice” (p. 229) and the form of philosophy that attends to them. On my view, philosophy is not political when it talks about politics and apolitical when it neglects to do so. Philosophy is always political or always practical *already*, in the sense that it is an historically-located and socially-constituted practice that has in turn its own concrete, historical and social effects. Philosophy may be, to be sure, either self-reflectively cognizant of its own political character or it may be in blinkered denial, but it is no less implicated in politics for that. Indeed, in the paper he presented in 1989 on Gadamer’s writings at an international conference on hermeneutics, which is included as an appendix to the book, Misgeld himself makes this point clearly. He writes,

The conversational tolerance of hermeneutic philosophy is purchased, so it appears, at the price of concealing from itself the harsh truthfulness of those voices which directly confronted Europe's imperial claims and its white supremacist ideologies, or the hypocrisy of its Christian mission. (p. 242)

"Thus," he continues, "there is a problem of power which lies at the very centre of the European *Geisteswissenschaften*," that is to say, of the traditional disciplines of the humanities (p. 243).

Yet the point that philosophy's neutrality is bought at the cost of political violence—violence that is both practised empirically and reflected theoretically—is one that Adorno had understood clearly. This is why it cannot be said, as Misgeld does in the 2005 interview, that for Adorno "the intellectual elaboration is more important than the political effect," and that he "wants to leave things as they are," whereas, in contrast, for Herbert Marcuse what was "more important is the political effect" (p. 70). To see things in this way is to presuppose that philosophy *is* the "function" of the "isolated" individual or individuals; it is to lose sight, precisely, of the way in which theory is necessarily implicated in and itself implicates political relations of power. One must therefore always take issue (as Adorno did) with the kind of thinking that supposes itself to be separable from reality. One must do so *not* because it is a form of philosophy that is traditional or "pure" and is therefore less than fully useful—one kind of philosophy as opposed to some other kind of philosophy—but because such thinking is itself deeply sullied, deeply impure; so called "pure philosophy" is a form of thinking that betrays its own promise, the very ethos of the Enlightenment in whose name it is carried out, because it conceals from itself its own political truth, whether it focuses on the "political effect" or not.

In other words, the point is that philosophy, properly so-called—what I call "theory"—is not sometimes subversive and sometimes not. It is, at least since the onset of modernity, necessarily subversive and disruptive, if it is done rigorously, and it is necessarily oppressive when it is not. For, insofar as it does lay claim to serving some kind of universalist end, theory cannot avoid the question of its own foundations, its own conditions of possibility, and these will always prove unfounded. This is why, as Misgeld himself points out, the tradition of the Enlightenment is all about "critical thinking and critique" (p. 135)—it is because it is a tradition borne of the need to justify knowledge in the absence of transcendental authority. And if this very need to justify itself has itself given rise to the realization that there is, as Misgeld also concedes, "no secure ground"—the realization of modernity, I would underline, that issues in its own post-modernization—then it follows quite directly that "you *cannot* put the history of metaphysics in front of you as an object and say, 'oh, there's metaphysics and I'm not longer part of it'" (p. 135, emphasis added). The outside that one seeks simply is not there.

It is evident that Misgeld acknowledges this point in general, but it is not clear that its full nature and ramifications have been understood. It means, in the first place, that there is no such thing as pure philosophy because there is always blindness in thought. A corollary of this, in the second place, is that there is no such thing as pure politics either, because theoretical assumptions always underlie our practice, whether we are cognizant of them or not. And this means in turn, in the third place, that the irreducible burden the critical theorist or philosopher must face is the need to take thinking itself to task self-reflectively, rather than to engage in politics at the more superficial level of talking about it. This is to say that the political or ethical dimension of theory lies, most importantly, not in what it *says* but rather in what it *does*.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by trying to flesh out these points. First, I have said that there is always blindness in thought. Here thought must be seen not simply as content, in terms of what it says, but rather as material practice. Let us take, for example, the interviewers' query concerning the "quasi-religious" quality of Heidegger's thought. Asked to elaborate on this, Misgeld's response was that he "wouldn't say that there is anything quasi-religious in *Being and Time*, other than an ethical element" (p. 41). As he goes on to clarify, by that he means that Heidegger is "not a rationalist," and that the ethical element pertains to his radical facing of death and the "fundamental attitude toward life" (p. 41)—a radicalness that went beyond concepts, and beyond philosophy, and that sometimes verged on the poetic (p. 42–43).

Now, as a characterization of Heideggerian philosophy this is surely fair enough but, arguably, it could be said about any view of ethics that is sufficiently radical and not strictly conceptual in its approach. In terms of its quasi-religiosity, however, what is missed is rather what Heidegger's thought *did*, which was to converge with at least one form of Nazism. Heidegger's embrace of the *Führer* cult (p. 94), for instance, and his philosophical celebration of the simplicity of peasant life against the menaces of technology—which we learn that Adorno saw through (p. 60)—cannot be disentangled from Heidegger's belief in German ethnic identity or his desire for a spiritual and philosophical revolution (Gadamer, in Derrida, Gadamer, & Lacoue-Labarthe, 2016, p. 12). Heideggerian philosophy thus offers a theoretical, highly abstract but nonetheless substantial form of a fascism that was being practised on the ground. I think that, following Horkheimer, it would be fair to say that Heidegger's philosophical work grew from the same historical roots as did fascist politics, even if not in exactly the same way.

Significantly, this quasi-religious form of thought is by no means limited to the right. In 1988 three philosophers convened in Heidelberg to discuss a text by Victor Farias, entitled *Heidegger and Nazism*, which had just then been published, and which Misgeld mentions too (p. 97). The three philosophers were Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Derrida there urged the audience, notwithstanding their shared understanding that no one was claiming to absolve Heidegger or to "render him innocent of every kind of fault in that respect,"

[to remain] vigilant with regard to the discussions that develop on this subject ... in such a way that they would not contain or reproduce the gestures, the aggressions, the implications, the elements of a scenography that recall *the very thing* against which [they were] allied. (Derrida, Gadamer, & Lacoue-Labarthe, 2016, p. 16–17; emphasis in original)

In other words, one ought not to use a totalitarian gesture to denounce totalitarianism.² The lesson here is clear: The political violence of thought is practised through its finitude and its absoluteness, beyond the particular message that it sends.

² This was also the spirit behind Gadamer's characterization of Farias's book as grotesquely superficial and overflowing with "ignorance" (Derrida, Gadamer, & Lacoue-Labarthe, 2016, p. 81). In a review of a much more recent text on Heidegger's Nazism, one written by Emmanuel Faye and published in 2009, Peter Gordon says virtually the same thing. He writes, "The most dismaying thing about Faye's book is that, apparently, he wants to deny us [the] freedom" to read Heidegger's writings in new ways; he adds that to reject the thought that authors may be mistaken about their own texts is "to succumb to the worst of interpretative authoritarianism" (2010, final para.).

What is at issue most profoundly, then, is the politics of good conscience and right answers, and this will be the case whether these are found in the lecture hall or in the square. Thus, to return to my second claim, there is no such thing as “pure politics” either, which is why one *cannot* have a critical position “without any element of philosophy in it” (p. 229). For instance, Misgeld offers “agitation for gay marriage and the equal rights for Gays and Lesbians and Transgendered people” as an example of a form of “social criticalness and the critique of power” that “has nothing to do with philosophy as such” (p. 230). But of course these agitations have *everything* to do with philosophy as such. Agitations for gay rights and equal marriage build directly on the liberal Enlightenment ideals of equality, individualism, freedom and autonomy, and they take liberal democracy to task specifically for failing to live up to its own ideal promises—promises that exist nowhere but in the conceptual realm of Western philosophical speculation, but which can and have had concrete, material effects. On the other hand, however, insofar as those liberal Enlightenment ideals were themselves forged in the fire of the bourgeois, capitalist revolution of early modernity, any political claims that are based upon them are theoretically contestable as well.

And this is why, to return to the third point, I maintain that the critical task of theory is not to promise emancipation with its words, but rather to remain vigilant about itself in its deeds, that is, to guard itself against its own self-righteousness, because that self-righteousness expresses itself in the very forms of oppression that progressives are ostensibly agitating against. In other words, to take one last example from the book, the problem with Habermas’s dream of “the completion of modernity” in the form of a “fully emancipated society” is not that it is too abstract, as Misgeld suggests (p. 138). The problem with it is that it embodies an idealism that closes the door dogmatically to future possibilities that the theorist does not and cannot see. Indeed, what could a “fully emancipated society” even mean? When or under what conditions could emancipation ever be “full,” and when could modernity be “complete,” if not when we’re all dead? A pedagogy of hope is a pedagogy that promises good ends because it can envision an end, and that is a promise that I wish never to live to see. Rather, I must side here with Derrida, who said at the Heidelberg conference in 1988 that one of the things he had learned from Heidegger was that “to trust in the traditional categories of responsibility seems ... precisely, irresponsible,” because the concept of responsibility was clearly not enough (2016, p. 24).³ “The categories that we use are insufficient,” he said (p. 51), and it is no less true today.

[These insufficiencies] make it such that the juridical discourse that dominates our societies is absolutely powerless to measure up to what is happening in those societies—criminality, pathology, what is unfurling in the form of the military-industrial [*sic*]*—this means our responsibility is to interrogate these concepts of responsibility that are not sufficient.* (p. 51)

That is what philosophy as critical theory can do, I submit, and such an interrogative practice is political through and through. Philosophy *is* subversive, at least when it’s done right.

³ Derrida was once called (rightly, in my view) “Adorno’s other son” (Deranty, 2006).

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