26: Steven LUKES

Le Grand Anti-Simplificateur

I have known Alan Montefiore for exactly fifty years—first as my philosophy tutor, then for two decades as my Balliol PPE colleague and throughout as a friend. He has influenced, in ways I will try to outline, my views of what are the most fundamental questions worth exploring. He is partly responsible for my interest in the complexities of the contested concept of power, in the multiple meanings of 'individualism,' in the category of the person and its varying manifestations across time and space, in the debate among philosophers and anthropologists about rationality and relativism, and now in the sociology of morals. I also blame him for my having always been a sort of academic nomad, inhabiting the borderlands of philosophy, sociology, anthropology and political science. Reading *A Philosophical Retrospective* (henceforth PR) has been a vivid reminder of what I owe him. What I want to do here is to try to record what in his teaching I have most valued. I'll start with where we most agree and then turn to those matters where I persist in resisting his views, so eloquently and characteristically set out in PR.

At the most general level, I have always shared, indeed warmly embraced, his expansive vision of philosophy as lacking "sharp boundaries, whether internal boundaries as between one field of philosophy and another or external ones as between 'professional' philosophy and any really seriously sustained effort or systematic thought on the major problems of 'real life'."

His distinctive philosophical approach has always been to distrust the relentless drive of so-called 'analytical' philosophers towards maximum clarity. By contrast, I have always found this drive appealing. Sainte-Beuve wrote of Benjamin Franklin that he was "*un grand, un trop grand simplificateur*." By contrast, Alan has been for me *un grand anti-*

simplificateur (sometimes succeeding in dissuading me from dismissing, too hastily, the ideas of thinkers, usually French, who lack the Cartesian virtues). Clarity, as they say is not enough; nor is it always attainable and it can be illuminating to understand why. Thus, he writes:

> concepts such as 'value' and 'value judgment,' 'fact' and 'statement of fact,' 'membership' and 'belonging,' not to mention that of 'identity' itself—turn out to be extraordinarily hard to pin down,

for it is illusory to suppose that

> the use of terms, their meanings, and associated concepts can be kept from shifting about in their relationships with each other and, more generally, in the networks of meaning to which they 'belong'.

And so, when trying to understand the relations between social and personal and role identity,

> any attempted analysis of these phenomena in terms of some too clear-cut and determinate set of definitions would be more than likely to result in a distortion of the real-life complexities of the phenomena in question.

When discussing the endless disagreements about the conditions of membership and consequent obligations of "the almost absurdly varying Jewish communities throughout the wider world," he writes that all "these arguments are highly resistant to any incontestably clear resolution." And yet Alan is no obscurantist purveyor of dark sayings. Indeed, his catalogue of six senses of 'identity' on pp. 11-12 of PR and subsequent discussion of their interrelations are, in my view, a significant analytical contribution, if not to the resolution of the arguments, certainly to the clarification of what the arguments are about.

'Identity' is the central topic of PR, the hinge that links its two central aims. The first aim is to exemplify the claim that the fact-value distinction is one of the grand simplifications of modern Western thought. It is often inapplicable, not least where we are dealing with facts about identity. And the second aim is to illustrate that claim by an extended discussion of the case of Jewish identity and, more particularly, in autobiographical vein, of that case as it has been wrestled with by Alan himself over his lifetime, as eldest son of a prominent Jewish family whose grandfather was a leading figure in the foundation of Liberal Judaism. What evaluative consequences, what obligations, responsibilities and commitments, if any, flow from this indubitable genealogical fact? Can one, given the facts of one's identity, just choose or determine for oneself what responsibilities and obligations are incumbent upon one and, in this case, what "the obligations attaching to …possession of a Jewish identity should be"? Does a secular, non-believing, non-practicing Jew have, by virtue of his Jewish identity, specific obligations and responsibilities?

On the fact-value question, he easily persuaded me and I was a ready convert, convinced by, among others, the arguments of Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams. Here too narrow a reading of Hume and too uncritical a reading of Max Weber led too many social scientists to neglect significant questions for a time, but the best are wiser now.

But it is within the murky topic of identity in general, and Jewish identity in particular, that that I find myself in initial agreement with Alan but resistant to travelling all the way down the road charted in PR.

First the points of agreement. As already indicated, I fully agree that, as a folk category, or what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'category of practice,' the notion of 'identity' very often conflates different (as Alan shows, at least six), sometimes contradictory meanings (This is why, for purposes of analysis and explanation it is, I think, a good idea to try to avoid use of the language of identity. I always ask students, when they speak this language, to say what they mean in other words). The most obvious such conflation is well characterized by Alan himself when he observes that identity offers an answer to either of two different questions: "is my identity to be thought of as a 'fact' of who and what I am, something that I have to accept as given and to which I have somehow to come to terms—or is it something that I can or even have to choose for myself."[1]

I also agree that in many instances, notably where what is involved is role identity, there is no difficulty in understanding that people can step aside from a particular identity, as from a position and its attached role: here it "must remain up to the individuals concerned to choose whether or not to identify themselves with any such role obligations as they may also accept,…as a matter of given fact, to be quite generally held to belong to the positions in question." If, as a judge, you dissent deeply enough from what you are required to decide in your judicial capacity, you can always resign. And I agree that "if one is able to think in terms of resigning from a given position, one must ipso facto be capable of thinking of oneself as a person

[1] For a brilliant elaboration of this theme by a sociologist and a historian I cannot recommend too highly the article Beyond Identity by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper in *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), pp. 1-47)

distinct from the role which one contemplates giving up." And I further agree that there is no 'view from nowhere': such thinking can only occur in one or another specific social context. Thus, Alan writes

> [t]he basic framework of one's self-identity, of one's ability to arrive at any reflexively self aware conception of oneself, is thus already given through one's membership in a certain sort of norm-governed community or, in more complicated cases, in a set of such overlapping and criss-crossing communities. Nor is it in principle possible that one might formulate a conception of oneself as standing wholly outside all and any such communities were one, in fact, so wholly outside them.[2]

I am also inclined to agree that the idea of autonomy—the "concept of persons as responsible and self-determining agents"—is "a historically relatively recent development and one, moreover, that has been more typically a feature of societies influenced by some combination of the values of the Enlightenment and of a generally Protestant outlook on life." It is, however, certainly not unique to such societies, as Amartya Sen likes to observe when discussing these matters in relation to the history of India, citing the Mughal emperor Akhbar, who promoted religious freedoms at the turn of the sixteenth century. Alan's claim is that what he calls 'value individualism' – where "individuals are seen as ultimately and irreducibly responsible for 'choosing' or determining their own ruling values" is

> an essentially modern development from a time when individual members of society had no intelligible choice other than to recognize that, over and above the norms or 'values' constitutive of the very meaning rules of their own language community, there was a whole range of other values, responsibilities, and obligations that were strictly inseparable from the very facts of their own particular situations.

It is true that he goes on to criticize the nostalgia of those who envy, in comparison with ours, a world in which "individuals have to accept certain basic values as given, as one of greater moral assurance and thus as essentially preferable" (perhaps he is thinking of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue)*. Like Bernard Williams, he thinks that "there is no route back from modernity": what people "cannot do is to choose themselves back into a conceptual situation where, in effect, they have no such conceptually underwritten capacity or imposed responsibility of choice."

[2] I confess to finding the last eight words here rather baffling, since I take Alan's claim, with which, as I say, I agree, to be that to be so wholly outside them is not conceivable.

I welcome this last, anti-communitarian thought, and yet I notice Alan's stress on its relativity to our Enlightenment-inspired societies and his bold claim that, for example, in the Moslem world-view, with its ban on conversion to any other religion, "there is simply no room for the concept of a person as someone responsible and self-determining as to his or her obligations across all the many different contexts of life." And it is here that I start to diverge from the direction his argument takes.

He is concerned to stress the depth of the differences between world-views in respect of the room they allow for autonomy. Being able to disentangle values from facts requires, he plausibly claims, "some reasonably robust sense of the person as an individually self-determining agent." Lacking such a concept, he continues, is "a matter of being rooted in a different form of life, based on and involving a different view of what it is to be a human being." Different societies and sub-societies, he writes, with "notably different forms of life" will embody "very different ruling assumptions about the constitution of the individual identities of their members." He even invites us at one point, admittedly (and uncharacteristically) "for the sake of a simplifying example", to consider "the case of an essentially homogeneous society."

Two things worry me here. One is empirical or perhaps quasi-empirical - a question of the 'facts' and how to interpret them. Claims about deep cultural diversity--that a 'world-view' has "no room" for the concept of individual autonomy and that "ruling assumptions" about "the constitution of individual identities" are "very different", need considerable unpacking before they become convincing. The anthropologist Melford Spiro asks: "Is the Western Conception of the Self 'Peculiar' within the context of the World Cultures?"[3] Moreover, such claims abstract altogether from the role of power, indoctrination and ideology, in confining people's thoughts and opportunities. Moreover they convey more than a whiff of cultural determinism, treating cultures and world-views as self-subsistent wholes. This makes increasingly less sense, especially in our mixed-up globalized world.

But even - and this is the second worry - to the extent that these claims can be sustained, the question becomes: What follows from the observation of such cultural and sub-cultural diversity? Does the observer's 'third-person' account of the relativity of perspectives to communities entail

[3] *Ethos*, 21(2), pp. 107-153.

a 'first-person' practical conclusion? Alan's 'puzzle' is "whether, and if so in what circumstances, the apparent 'facts' of a person's identity can somehow include, as among their given elements, a range of responsibilities and obligations incumbent upon the person whose identity it is." Specifically, he asks, did the facts of his own inherited identity dictate "how I ought or ought not to order my life?" Given the "counter insistences of so many of the elder generation" of his family and their community, did it make sense for him to "determine for myself what my obligations should be to what they understood as the tradition"? Do we "have to accept our membership in the group in question as a given aspect of our own (personal) identity and hence as constitutive of the point of view from which we are thus bound to speak?"

I also hold that being Jewish does indeed impose a "range of responsibilities and obligations," but not because the facts of my identity dictate them. The fact of my being identified as Jewish is independent of my will. We live, however, in the shadow of the Holocaust and, given the way the world is, there seem to me good reasons, in some contexts, to assert, even embrace this identity and never to deny it. I assume, as, Alan informs us, those "among the secular or at the Liberal end of the religious spectrum do," that "what is to be counted as a Jewish identity" is "up to the individual concerned." I agree with his remark that "the identification of Jews as Jews is in the end tied up with reference to traditional Jewish beliefs and practices" and with his thought that the very option of being a non-religious Jew ultimately depends on "the continuing survival of a core community of religiously committed and actively practicing Jews." For those who value the secular life and culture of Jews to flourish and enjoy their rich traditions (from Jewish jokes and cuisine, to Yiddish theatre and Klesmer music) without the tedious intrusions of religious faith and ritual, others, elsewhere, must keep the flame alive.

But, as such a secular Jew, I regard asserting, even embracing Jewish identity as a matter of honour (and denying it as a matter of shame). It is a matter of honouring the countless victims of anti-Semitism across the millennia and of declaring solidarity with its present and future victims, as well as a determination to resist all instances of its continuation and revival. (In New York today, where I currently live, I must admit that this requires little courage.)

And there are two further good reasons for secular and liberal people identified as Jews to embrace their Jewishness. One, simply, is to resist bigotry and keep alive the plurality of interpretations of what it means to Jewish, and to resist the familiar imputation of being 'self-hating Jews' ; even Jewish anti-Semites. And the other is to voice solidarity with current victims of the Jewish state in the West Bank and Gaza, and to pos standing challenge to the often-repeated claim of the politically domin Israeli right wing and their spokesmen and allies outside Israel, to be uniquely authoritative spokesman of what Jewish identity means.

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