
The Problem of Theory

I. NEW REQUIREMENTS FOR THEORY

The Platonic Problematic. Sustained reflection on theory, at least in the West, began with Plato in *The Republic*. His very reflections might also have been the first theories, except in mathematics.¹ Our study begins well by providing a reading of Plato's approach. *The Republic* opens with Cephalos and Polemarchos attempting to answer Socrates' questions about justice with quotations from the poets; in their citation of poetic images, they epitomize the modes of thought of imagination, the first level of the Divided Line (*Republic*, book VI).² Thrasymachos, the sophisticated courtroom wrangler, interrupts in frustration at this literary approach and says that in commonsense life we know what justice is, namely the interest of the stronger. Socrates then leads Thrasymachos through a series of verbal analogies to affirm that justice is the interest of the weaker, contradicting himself. In greater frustration Thrasymachos says we all know that injustice pays, not a just life. Again Socrates leads him around through some not-so-logical arguments to say that justice pays and injustice does not, another contradiction. Thrasymachos retires in speechlessness at the end of book I. Practiced in thinking on the second level of the Divided Line, he thinks himself wise in life's lessons but has no theory with which to express them and therefore cannot hold his own in *logos*.

Then Adeimantos and Glaucon, Plato's half-brothers and natural theorizers, take up Thrasymachos' argument. Pointing out the need for theory (not in so many words), they suggest (*Republic*, book II, 359a) the Hobbesian postulate that human nature is fundamentally aggressive. With this postulate determining a theoretical perspective it is possible to understand why Thrasymachos would say that the winners in aggression, the powerful, would define the content of justice as their interest. "Official justice" is a "compromise between the best, which is to do wrong with impunity, and the worst, which is to be wronged and be impotent to get

one's revenge. Justice . . . being midway between the two, is accepted and approved, not as a real good, but as a thing honored in the lack of vigor to do injustice." Within this theoretical perspective it also makes sense to say that injustice, that is, brutalizing others for selfish gain, is what pays, and that adherence to justice in the sense of fair play is likely to lead to weakened aggressive force. Moreover, this theoretical standpoint makes sense of the observation that myths are used by the cynical and powerful to control the gullible and weak. So far, Adeimantos and Glaucon have shown that making certain theoretical assumptions or postulates allows for seeing the logic of a situation within which Thrasy-machos' observations make sense. With this theory, it is possible to defend those observations within their proper limits and with proper qualifications, without having to represent them as theoretical definitions of justice.

Pleased with this procedure, Socrates suggests an improvement in the theoretical postulate. That human nature is fundamentally aggressive does not suggest much about what justice is in a normative sense; nor does it seem consistent with some obvious facts about human nature, namely that people have to work hard, that they are driven by needs and desires, and that they prize productivity as well as power. Socrates proposes (book II, 369b) the substitution of Lockean appetitiveness as the defining trait of human nature, and further proposes that the discussion draw out the formal implications of this both for society and for individual personality structure.³ Glaucon and Adeimantos delight in this procedure. Socrates points out that appetite consists in needs and desires and that it fosters productivity. Societies advance in productivity as they divide labor into specialized and shared tasks, and the resulting increase in productivity creates new desires, thereby stimulating new forms of productivity. Luxuries and surpluses bring the danger of foreign invasion and perhaps also internal thievery. Therefore some of the citizens must abandon the life of productivity and enjoyment for that of providing police and military protection. All of this seems right to Adeimantos and Glaucon and tends to confirm the postulated assumption that human nature is fundamentally appetitive. Aggressive people are needed for armed protection because appetitive folk would be too soft. The appetitive postulate has ruled out the possibility of aggressive people, however, and Socrates wants to continue developing the theory following from the appetitive postulate. So he introduces (book II, 375a) the military with the subhuman metaphor of watchdogs. Whereas appetitive people are educated through learning greater productive skills and more refined tastes, the aggressive watchdogs learn by imitation and repetition, in martial arts and dance.

As the well-protected state grows and takes its active place among other states with which it trades and might go to war, the need for specialized coordination and leadership becomes apparent and a third class of people must be cultivated, the deliberative or rational people. The appetitive postulate has ruled out the possibility of these people as well, however, so Socrates introduces them (book III,

415a) through the metaphor of base metals, even farther from the “postulated human” than watchdogs. Their education is through philosophy and apprenticeship at ruling.

Socrates is now ready (book IV) to give theoretically well-formed definitions of justice. On the social side, a society is just when all three classes—producers, the military, and the rational rulers—are doing their own jobs and neither attempting to do someone else’s job nor failing to do their own. On the personal side, Socrates suggests that each person’s soul has three parts, corresponding to appetite, aggression or spiritedness, and reason. This latter, of course, would be impossible within a theory based on the postulate that human nature is fundamentally appetitive, but the boys, Glaucon and Adeimantos, have missed Socrates’ shift in theoretical foundations. A person can be called just when the three parts of soul are each doing its own job and not the others’.

Adeimantos and Glaucon are delighted with the elegance of this and insist (book V, 449b) that Socrates continue drawing out theoretical implications which they will see to be illustrated in their society. Socrates would prefer to examine the education of rational types in more detail, but pauses to draw out further implications of this rational-military-economic theory of an efficiency-driven society and personality. The boys go from enthusiasm to slack-jawed acquiescence as Socrates describes how such a society would have to practice equality among men and women, meritocratic appointment to tasks, eugenics to breed the right types of persons, destruction of natural families, goal-directed early childhood education with warrior children watching their parents go to war, even having wrinkled old men and women wrestle in the gymnasia (book V, 449-75). Some of these implications do not seem so strange to us real-life Lockeanes, but Adeimantos and Glaucon are reduced at the end to listening to Socrates talk about the education of a philosopher (from book V, 475 through the end of book VII). And after that Socrates introduces an entirely different theoretical postulate about society and human nature based on social class personality types, aristocrat, lover of honor, lover of money, lover of equality of judgment, and despot (book VIII). The boys once again fail to notice that Socrates has shifted the theoretical underpinnings here too.

What is to be learned about theory from the first five books of *The Republic*? First, there is a significant difference between the power in a theory’s founding principles to generate theoretical implications, which Glaucon and Adeimantos followed with delight, and the restrictions set by those founding principles, which they rarely noticed. The existence of spirited and rational types of persons and parts of soul is not consistent with the postulate that human nature is defined by appetite alone. By the end of that discussion, Socrates surreptitiously had amended the principles to say, in effect, that human nature includes at least three kinds of people, appetitive, spirited, and rational, and moreover that each person has some balance of all three internal to the soul.⁴ If that more complex set of principles had

been introduced earlier in the discussion, the unexpected ways that theoretical principles, postulates or assumptions give rise to theoretical implications would have been obscured. Furthermore, it is unlikely that as clear a picture as Plato's of the efficiency-driven society of production, war, and calculation would have emerged from a theory where from the beginning rationality and aggressive spirit-ness are as important as desire and productivity.

By his dramatic rhetorical devices (not dull philosophic prose), Plato shows what happens to commonsense insights when no theory is present; he also shows what happens when unproductive or obviously reductive theoretical principles are present, when productive principles generate implications that make much sense of the way we commonly understand society, when theoretical contradictions are generated, requiring the supplementing of the principles, and when to abandon one theoretical framework to try another. Some scholars, for instance Robert S. Brumbaugh, believe that Plato advanced what we would call a hypothetico-deductive model of theory as a pure structure of (Platonic) forms, and they distinguish that from the intellectual process of dialectic.⁵ Socrates, though not Adeimantos or Glaucon, was good at dialectic and thus could lead the boys on a merry chase.

But this view distinguishes theory from dialectic too sharply. Theory is not just the structure of hierarchically implicated forms but also the process of drawing out implications, seeing whether they relate to phenomena, amending the theory from principles on down, and so forth. Dialectic, on Plato's official account, has to do not with the ever-moving process of theory building, testing, and amending but with stepping up from theories to higher and higher levels of generality so as to be able to say what makes theories harmonious. Theorizing, for Plato, is a back-and-forth process, often subsequently called dialectical itself, of inventing principles, shifting to better ones that encompass more for which an account is needed, drawing out implications, correlating implications with phenomena, checking whether the results are coherent with the principles, whether more principles or higher integrations are needed, and so forth.

Plato's purpose was for the participants in the discussion to attain to a synoptic vision of society and individuals so as to be able to sort through the poetic images and common sense morals about justice. Without the synoptic vision, they lacked orientation and could not discuss the subject. Nor, as it was implied in the cases of Cephalos and Thrasymachos, were they able to behave justly without that orientation.

In our own time, Alfred North Whitehead is cited for defining the criteria for theories, at least philosophic theories: They should be consistent, coherent, applicable, and adequate. What is less frequently cited is Whitehead's insistence that the synoptic vision gained by such theories is the product of a (dialectical) movement up and down the implicate ladders of the theory, up and down levels of abstraction, round and round the hermeneutical circles of checking theoretical

deductions by evidence and redefining the categories of evidence by theory, amending both theory and the sweep of evidence in the process. Whitehead practised this dialectic less in *Process and Reality* than in books such as *Science and the Modern World*, *Adventures of Ideas*, and *Modes of Thought*. But he preached it regularly.⁶

Another preliminary lesson to be learned from Plato is that theories are what we now, since Peirce, would call *hypotheses*.⁷ That is, theories are human constructions of formal ideas that are supposed to represent their subject matter. In *The Republic* alone Plato tried out several hypotheses, each of which had virtues and faults. Theories are true to the extent they represent their subject matters to be as the subject matters are (Aristotle picked up on that definition of truth; *Metaphysics*, book IV, chapter 7, 1011b26). But theories can leave things out that should not be left out (inadequacy), represent things or traits to exist that do not (inapplicability), have contradictions (inconsistency), have formal elements that do not relate to one another (incoherence), or interpret their subject matters in limited, misguided, or pointless respects (irrelevance). Many of the critics of theory, especially philosophic theory, do not appreciate the fact that at least some philosophers, beginning with Plato, look upon even the grandest metaphysical theories as hypotheses with whatever plausibility argument can give them.

The problem for a theory of theories is to understand how to have synoptic visions that are hypothetical and subject to correction by the evidence. There are of course many kinds of theories, for instance scientific, literary, and philosophic theories, distinguished by their subject matters. At least some philosophic theories, called *metaphysical* in the West, are distinguished by taking all subjects, directly or indirectly, to be their subject matter. Theories also have histories. Their terms, the identification of their subject matters, even their habits of dialectic and instruments of investigation are to be understood in historical context. Given this historicist point, we should expect all theories to be modified or traded in for other, hopefully better, ones in the future.⁸ All theories, whether limited in subject matter or not, should be synoptic and hypothetical so as to serve the purpose of orientation.

Central parts of Plato's theory of theories, in summary, are (1) that they aim to provide a synoptic view of things, (2) that they are artificial constructs of forms that allow alternatives to be compared dialectically, and (3) that theories are supposed to be true of the world so far as they interpret it. All of these points will find restatement and defense in the theory of theories developed here. Although my treatment of theory is vastly different from Plato's, in ways to be spelled out, it does take its rise from Plato's discussion as rehearsed above.⁹

The Confucian Problematic. Our own time presents a special problem for a theory of theories. Our differences from Plato come from accepting two prob-

lematic elements of our situation that either did not enter or did not trouble his. The first is that different cultures apparently have widely different theoretical substructures or forms. One must say “apparently different” because when butted against each other they cannot easily be compared at much depth. Facile comparisons that come from translating the literature of two or more cultures into the language of one of them often are delusive. Whether cultures really and truly have widely different theoretical substructures is an empirical matter that can be decided only after honest comparisons can be made. Therefore, one of the principal tasks of a theory of theories for our time is to develop a conception of theory that crosses cultures and allows for cross-cultural comparison. Whereas Plato wanted a theory that showed how individuals and their personality strengths relate to justice in social organization, our time needs a theory allowing for a comparison of how the Chinese, Indian, and Western cultures treat that problem.¹⁰ The commensuration of cultures is now a major part of attaining a synoptic orienting vision of reality.

The ancient Chinese philosophers, Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, especially the last, saw this problem in a stark form that has not been widely appreciated in the West until the twentieth century. They all held that the degree to which people could be truly human is measured by the degree to which they have a good culture. Their general argument was this: Culture is something added to nature in the sense that it provides rule-governed, symbolically meaningful behaviors that overlie, enrich, and complicate natural behaviors, and it is in these additions that human life takes on the excellences of civilization. They called the symbolically shaped behaviors *rituals*. The paradigm cases were indeed religious rituals. Men and women can copulate naturally and produce children, but without some intricate system of rituals of the sort the Chinese called filiality, family life in the civilized sense is not possible. Individuals can cooperate in the hunt or in preparing food, but without the rituals of respect, deference, prizing differences and so forth, there can be no true friendship. Women and men can live together, cooperating in the necessities of household life, but without the rituals of married love and the divisions of authority they cannot have a marriage. Families and individuals can group naturally into communities of convenience, but without the rituals defining the various roles and reciprocities of responsibilities, with due respect, for leaders at different levels of government, there can be no civilized civil society. Classes of otherwise similar people, such as children within a family or citizens in a town, can be lumped together in a classification, but they cannot associate with one another in a civilized way in that jumble unless there are some orders of deference defining mutual responsibilities and respect, such as birth order, wisdom, or age. These five relations—between parents and children, between friends, between spouses, between members of the political order, and between those classed together—were taken by the ancient Confucians to sym-

bolize many kinds of relations that need to be ritualized in order to be lifted from natural scrapping to the excellences of civilized life. Xunzi made the observation that at the natural level human beings are at about the same level of strength and would compete with one another like animals, not cooperating enough to produce needed goods or security.¹¹ But unlike Hobbes, who from a similar observation concluded that we need an absolute sovereign if civil society is to be possible, Xunzi and his fellow Confucians said all we need is civilized ritual and emperors who follow it.¹² When the Confucians feared the dissolution of civil society and a return to barbarous nature, what they had in mind was the loss of practiced ritual habits.

Confucian civilizing rituals should not be construed as ritual forms imposed from without, although that is perhaps how the young learn some of them. Rather, they are like language, gestures, habits of eye contact, styles of intervening in conversation, and other sign-formed behaviors, learned usually without self-consciousness, that shape the total complex of human behavior. Indeed, all of those things are included within the Confucian array of rituals. One of the most vital developments of contemporary Confucian philosophy is the reinterpretation of the theory of ritual in terms of Peirce's theory of signs: signs are the leading principles shaping the habits of human behavior at all levels.¹³

Ritual behaviors in this sense (just as in Western political courts and religions, though not so often noticed there) build upon one another in intricate symbolic networks. Perhaps there is no purely natural human action that is not symbolically or ritually formed in some sense. Surely the genetic disposition of the brain is built to handle signs and verbal symbols. But the level of ritual in a given group can be barbaric, as the ancient Confucians would put it. No family life, just kids crawling all over, no friendship, just enforced temporary cooperation, no marriage, just sex, no political order, just power-displays, no general human relations, just scrabbling. This barbarian condition is indeed minimally defined by coarse rituals, but these do not give rise fruitfully to the higher rituals that build more and more intricate behaviors to the point where good family life, friendships, marriages, civil society, and respectful human interactions occur.

To be truly human is to have a high degree of culture defined in this way through ritual. The Confucian tradition was clear to say that the human sphere is not only principles of organization (Heaven) or nature (Earth) but something that builds out of their combination to fulfill both Heaven and Earth.¹⁴ Unlike ancient Western cosmologies that distinguished only Heaven and Earth, the Confucians proclaimed a trinity of Heaven, Earth, and the Human.¹⁵ Unlike modern Western cosmologies that set culture in opposition to nature, the ancient Chinese represented culture as arising from, building, and improving upon, nature. The important social discrimination for the Confucians was not between one culture and another but between the civilized and the barbarians. They took themselves to be

civilized by heritage. But the prophetic edge of Confucius and nearly all his followers was that their culture seemed to be slipping back into barbarism. That Confucius' own time is called the Period of the Warring States illustrates what he was talking about.

At the same time that they were articulating the need for high civilization, and indicating the ritual forms in which that consists, the ancient Chinese were fully aware of the conventional character of their rituals.¹⁶ They knew that their signs, like the Chinese language, were particular inventions that had been handed down by tradition and transformed in the process. Other high civilizations might have different languages and rituals shaping the "five relations"; they might even divide the relations differently. The question of degree of value or humaneness in any system of civilized ritual for Confucians was largely a functional one. Confucius said, with regard to a conflict among rules regarding what kind of cap to wear in the temple, linen or silk, that it made no difference: use the cheaper, or what you have. But with regard to whether you should bow in respect at the bottom of the steps up to the temple or wait until you are in the doorway, it is more civilized to do the former because that signals greater respect for entering into sacred space.¹⁷

Now comes the first Confucian problem for Platonic theory. How can we develop a theory that embraces cultures all of which claim (rightly, let us suppose) to be ways of normative human life and yet each of which is conventional (and perhaps recognizes the others to be subject to different conventions)? The quick answer suggested by the above is that they can be compared with reference to how well, in different ways, they perform the civilizing functions. But of course the expression of those functions must itself be in the rituals of one civilization or another. What are theoretical constructs but high-level intellectual rituals, consisting of high-level language and habits of speculation and analysis? Confucius was able to adjudicate about hats and rituals of bowing because he and his colleagues were shaped by higher-level rituals defining what counts as proper reverence in worship. There is no higher-than-all-cultures ritual or conceptual language to compare different cultures.

Therefore a non-Platonic problem for a contemporary understanding of theories is how to have synoptic vision across cultures, recognizing the Confucian points about the normativeness of culture for humanity and also its conventionality. Plato might be thought to have recognized this problem because his society had indeed come to recognize that there were other high civilizations than their own, at least the Persian and the Egyptian. Sophistry was the first philosophic cultural response to that, and much of Plato's project can be understood as rebutting the sophists' inference from cultural difference to relativism or the non-normativeness of all cultures. Plato's speculative constructions of forms and the good, of dialectic and practical training, had to do with reestablishing the authority within culture of normativeness as such. Perhaps he would not have denied the conventionality of

the social vehicles of normativeness, but he would not have seen the problem of conventionality starkly as the problem of comparison. The Western tradition did not grapple with the Confucian problematic in a serious way until the Christian missionaries went to Asia, and even then the issues were those of compatibility, not comparison, as in the arguments of Matteo Ricci in China, until the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁸

The second problematic part of our situation in which Plato had no interest is that theory needs to be able to recognize the *theoretical* implications of the ways metaphors, symbol systems, and even pluralities of theories pile up on one another in layers. Poets make points by overlaying metaphors; religions fill liturgical life with vast stretches of massed symbol systems.¹⁹ Indeed, this is another Confucian problematic because this overlaying of meanings is the way rituals pile on one another, each itself an archeologically deep set of nested habits. The ancient Confucians themselves did not construct formal theories perhaps because they wrote poetically so effectively, overlaying one image on another, one story on another, one homiletic admonition on another. Only after Confucianism began to interact with yin-yang numerology and Daoist alchemy and cosmological speculations did formal theorizing begin in the Confucian tradition.²⁰ But of course the Confucians did finally come to theory, very sophisticated theory at that, when they needed a synoptic orientation relative to Buddhism and Daoism.²¹

Theories need to be able to register poetry and theology without having to reduce them to consistent, univocal expressions; otherwise they would miss the singularity of so many things, a singularity that consists precisely in a density of incompatible interpretable features. Singularity was accorded deep deference by the ancient Confucians, as well as by the ancient Daoists. Perhaps Chuang Tzu was the greatest poetic master of reference and deference to the singular.²² Ancient China knew about the reduction of singulars to classes. Confucius' school's greatest competitor was the school of Mozi who emphasized the equality of all people and the importance of treating them all alike. But both the Confucians and Daoists affirmed, over against the Moists, that each person is unique and should be treated differently from all others. Because the Confucians defined persons ritually in terms of roles—spouse, friend, and so on—it is possible to take them to intend a reduction of singular individuals to those roles. When Confucian culture becomes corrupted into hollow ritual, its perennial danger and failing, that is what happens: overdetermination of people by roles. But the point of the diversity of roles was precisely to indicate the unique singularity of each person—third daughter of so and so, married to such and such, friend of this person, cousin of the mayor, and so forth. The density of overlapping ritual identities is what defines personal uniqueness and singularity for the Confucians.

To be sure, Plato himself was a master poet who massed images with a genius that has not been surpassed. One need only think of the layering of appar-

ently theoretical definitions of justice in *The Republic*: giving everyone their due, serving the interests of the stronger, delusion of the weak by the strong, principles for controlling aggression, principles for protecting a productive state, a harmony of social functions where each type does its part, a management of harmony by those who understand the Good, that which good people cling to when circumstances make all actions unjust, that which tells us how to mix the diverse elements of individual life. Each of these characterizations of justice is shown to be problematic in *The Republic*, yet true in its way. Plato thought he could sort these theories by dialectic and *nous*, the fourth level of the Divided Line. But their cumulative impact and truth comes from Plato's poetic massing of them, not from any line of Socrates' dialogue with his conversation partners. Plato was perhaps too suspicious of poetry and sedimented religious traditions to respond to this problem. The Confucians were more direct. Our theory of theories needs to acknowledge and build from this phenomenon. For short we can call the phenomenon *metaphoric overlay*, while noting that many kinds of symbol systems can be in the overlayment besides those that are customarily labeled metaphors. Confucian rituals are a powerful case in point.

Reductive and Nonreductive Theories. The discussion of Confucianism and cultural comparisons might have derailed the approach to a theory of theories. There are at least some theories, for instance mathematical ones, that seem not culturally contextual at all. Perhaps some theories in natural sciences also have this status, especially those that are so new, as in astrophysical cosmogony, that they have little cultural context of any kind.

But some of the most important elements of any theory are what it leaves out, how it limits its subject matter, and how those limitations affect a wider range of conditions. This negative or external side of theory was one of the principal lessons of *The Republic* and its shifts from one theory to another. In the current situation, Western economic theory takes itself to need variables to explain only the market; economic theories in Confucian societies such as China, Korea, and Japan assume that considerations of normative family structure need also be taken into account, not only to know how families affect the market but how the market affects families. (Even the Western cognates of the word *economics* mean *household*.) Economic theory is thus culturally contextual in how it draws its boundaries, whether to include normative family considerations. So obviously is psychological theory as between individualistic and group-oriented cultures, and so on.

Now the ways in which theories define their boundaries flow from their high-level principles, assumptions, or postulates. Those principles formally imply what can be handled and what not. Mathematical theories can handle things that can be quantified and must trivialize other things. Western economic theories can

handle things that can be exchanged and must trivialize other things. More subtle issues of definition arise in theoretical discussion of political rights and responsibilities.

Indeed, are not theories by definition supposed to be reductive? Is not their point to articulate as few formal variables as possible whose relations and interactions can be shown to pick out the important structures and causal relations (or meaning relations in literary theories) in their subject matter? The answers to these questions are not as obvious as the questions themselves.

Surely it is true that theories are selective, if not reductive. The formal terms and categories of any theory select out what they identify as important, and leave behind as trivial what the theory does not register. Chapter 2 will explore this point in much greater detail. Several distinctions need to be made here, however, to connect selectivity with its neighboring concepts.

A theory is selective *and reductive* if the selection is justified by some particular virtue of the formal terms of the theory itself. For instance, the elegance of mathematics is a powerful virtue that was turned to use in empirical theories by the invention of mathematical physics during the European renaissance. The theoretical neatness of mathematics by itself justified the almost frenzied enthusiasm of the modern period to mathematize theories of everything. All modern mathematized science is reductive in this sense. Its theories display only the structures and relations of phenomena that can be measured and quantified. Those that cannot are left out as trivial. That values are trivialized under the paradigms of mathematized sciences has already been remarked. But scientific reductionism is not the only kind of reductionism. Traditions themselves prize certain theoretical terms. Religions like to see everything explained in terms of their symbol systems. Some European philosophers think that an idea is not philosophical unless it can be expressed in relation to Kant. Families, educational institutions, and many other centers of symbolization have particular theoretical terms that they prize for their own sake. They are interested in what turns out to be important when those terms are used as the categories of recognition and explanation.

Reductive theories can be true or false. Although they interpret their subject matters in the respects that can be recognized in their terms, their subject matters either have the characteristics attributed to them in the theories or they do not; if the former, the theories are taken to be true, so far as they go, and in the latter, false. Of course, in the matter of reductive theories the phrase "so far as they go" is very important because those things the theories register from the subject matter might be highly misleading representations of the subject matter as a whole. An economic theory that recognizes only market mechanisms and not family life is a case in point.

Theories also can be selective *and instrumental*. A theory is instrumental if its formal terms and categories are functions of some purpose. A streetmap, for

instance, is a kind of theory about the terrain that indicates where roads are and where things are to which travelling by road might be relevant, for instance buildings, rivers, and borders. A map would not necessarily represent who owns what, who made the roads, or what sights are thrilling or obnoxious. The territory and its terrain could be represented theoretically by any number of other kinds of theory, for instance histories, botanical descriptions, and the like, if different purposes were to be served. By virtue of being related to purpose, instrumental theories are likely to contain formal variables about which people can do something, variables relative to possible actions, such as traveling from one place to another. For purposes of driving a streetmap is good. But for the purposes of a bomber pilot with heat-seeking missiles, a map locating heat sources would be better, never mind the roads.

Instrumental theories also can be true or false. If the subject matter can be interpreted at all by the formal terms that serve the purpose at hand, then either it has the traits the theory represents, in which case it is true, or it does not and is false. A street map is true if the roads are in fact where it says.

Most modern technology involves theories that combine both reductionism and instrumentalism. Technologists of course are shaped by purposes and want their theories to have terms relevant to possible actions and interventions. Medical science, for instance, wants theories that relate to possible symptom diagnoses and medical interventions. Reductive sciences are often ready for instrumental use, and the elegance of mathematical formulations gives them a range and power that often surpasses the agglomerated "empirical" theories of technicians who patch together various modes of diagnostic and interventionist access. "Basic" scientists, even in technologically dominated fields, are sometimes impatient with instrumentalist attempts to push theories prematurely to application.

Finally, theories can be selective *and non-reductive*. A theory is non-reductive if the selections made by its formal terms and categories do not distort the importances that things in its subject matter have on their own. Although things understood through a non-reductive theory will be represented only partially because of the selective character of the theoretical forms, those representations need not distort the values represented in the things. The values implicit in the theoretical forms register the values in the things, however partially. Instrumental actions based on non-reductive theories do not distort the things' various kinds of value or importance in the way the things are represented for action, although of course the instrumental purpose might be to destroy the things; medicine, for instance, seeks to destroy disease germs and can have a non-reductive theory of germs to do this. Non-reductive theories, like the others, are true or false depending on whether the subject matter, with its importances, is as the theory represents.

Non-reductive theories differ from reductive and purely instrumental ones by virtue of internalizing some recognition of how the theory leaves things out. A

non-reductive theory needs to build in safeguards for the non-distortion of importances. Perhaps all theories of the non-reductive sort are philosophic theories because they build in dialectical relations to other theories that might identify what they themselves trivialize so that tests for importance can be made. Philosophical theory itself in this sense is by necessity systematic. System here does not mean a single formal theory but rather the investigation of the subject from every angle imaginable. Of course no philosophic theory is ever complete at this. Few, in fact, do better than Plato in *The Republic*. But Plato's is one of the most important models of philosophical theorizing, examining justice from many theoretical angles to see what turns out to appear important in the theoretically cumulative long run.

The challenge for a contemporary theory of theories is not so much to account for reductive and instrumental theories as it is to make the case for the possibility of non-reductive theories. Non-reductiveness has been the ideal from the beginning. What is synoptic vision if not a non-reductive view of the whole? But now the non-reductivism of the Platonic heritage of reflection about theory needs also to attend to the singularity that has been uppermost in Chinese thinking since the beginning, and which constitutes the second Confucian problematic remarked above.

Singularity. There are two traits of singularity that either separately or together constitute the reef upon which most attempts at non-reductive theory founder and sink into reductionism or mere instrumentalism: uniqueness and haecceity or "thisness."

Singular things are unique in the sense that each is different from every other thing. Perhaps the difference is only numerical or a function of being in different places or times. Difference itself is a matter of different natures or characters, and the natures can be common to many things as well as instantiated in singular things. That a nature is instantiated in only one thing, or in fact is instantiated in many, is indifferent to the role it performs in making the thing different from other things. Only by virtue of having a determinate nature or character can a thing be different from some other thing, and the difference consists, at the least, in having a different nature. So, the Confucians are right to identify different individuals by the congeries of roles or natures that individuate them. Only one person is the third-born daughter of the person married to a certain other person, cousin of the mayor, and so forth. By virtue of the various natures they have, or traits or characteristics, things have various kinds of importance, as the discussion in chapter 2 will show.²³

Singulars are not only unique but also absolutely particular, "thises," or as Duns Scotus called them, "haecceities." The haecceity of a singular might seem like a contraction of a common nature, but in fact is something else. The singular

person has the common nature of having a nose, indeed the more specific common nature of having a hooked nose, with a blemish on the left side, exactly 94/95ths of an inch from the tip of the nostril, and so on. As long as the characteristics can be specified, it is possible that someone else could have a nose just like it, although more unlikely the more characteristics are specified. The person in actuality has just this nose and no other. All the levels of specificity of common natures are true of the nose, but the nose is still a this and is not identifiable wholly with any or all of its common natures. For this reason poets and others overlay the metaphors and symbols—all common natures after their fashion—to indicate the haecceity of the singular. Haecceity has a kind of infinite density, analyzable into an indefinite number of common natures but never fully so analyzable. That infinite density is the source of the infinite and finally incomparable value in things.²⁴

From differentiating common natures comes importance, and from individuating haecceity comes infinite value. The explication of this is the topic of chapter 2. Non-reductive theories cannot articulate the infinite value of haecceity, and must piously defer to it. Yet non-reductive theories can indeed articulate the relative importances of singulars as carried in things' common natures or traits. In this sense, non-reductive theories can be sensitive to singulars, as theories should be.

II. THE TIMELINESS OF THEORY

In these times, even when all that is said and done, *theory* is a dangerous word to express ideas of the sort intended by this study, for in the current intellectual climate it commonly means the wrong things or nothing good at all. *Theory* by itself is used by deconstructionist literary critics to mean something like postmodern ideology-critique, which is itself an attack on all theories as logocentric.²⁵ The attack is generally motivated by sympathy for those whose lives are distorted or marginalized by the language and assumptions of theories taken to be dominant. Whatever the merits of the postmodern enterprise, that use of the word *theory* simply is not dealing with the same topic as theory in the classical sense deriving from Plato, the topic here.

The contemporary furor about theory, however, is not wholly arbitrary in reference to the Western tradition derivative from Plato. For many, the attack on theory is an attack on Hegel who, as Richard Bernstein has pointed out, frequently is interpreted, incorrectly, to subsume all otherness into an absolute theoretical sameness. Bernstein draws out the irony of this misinterpretation in a discussion that at the same time states the furious suspicion of synoptic theories in the twentieth century:

Hegel understood what has become even more extreme in the twentieth century—how the lust for absolute freedom and abstract universality can seek to destroy all dif-

ferences, otherness, and plurality. Consequently, it is profoundly ironic that Hegel is frequently caricatured as if he were advocating what he so brilliantly and relentlessly criticized. We can see this in Lyotard's rhetorical ending of his essay, "What is Postmodernism?" where, with direct reference to Hegel, he declares:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement we can hear mutterings of the desire for a return to terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences.

"Let us activate the differences"—that might almost be taken as a slogan for the twentieth-century concern with alterity and otherness.²⁶

Bernstein proceeds in his usual brilliant irenic fashion to contrast the approaches of Gadamer and Derrida to the recognition of otherness. For Gadamer,

all understanding is comparative. And in such a comparison, we not only risk our prejudices and prejudgments, we also need to learn how to imaginatively extend or modify the very categories and genres of our descriptions.²⁷

For Derrida, on the other hand, comparison smacks of a theoretical metaphysics in terms of which the comparisons might be made.

So even here, in Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics and logocentrism, he is concerned to expose the potent drive toward subordination, marginalization, exile, suppression, and repression of the Other. If we examine much of the philosophy of religion until the present, we can detect vulgar and sophisticated forms of this potent drive. Derrida's language is not that of dialogue, reconciliation, and fusion. It is the language of double readings, double gestures, and double binds.²⁸

The question for a theory of theories is whether it can do justice to the appreciations of otherness while also orienting a dialogue among Others. Is there a theoretical context in which dialogue can substitute for conflict in the exercising of the otherness of Others? Does the emphasis on what is excluded from expression in synoptic vision, namely singularity, do justice to the problem?

The now popular literary-critical use of *theory* recognizes both of what above were called the Confucian problems, the apparent incommensurability of cultures and the assertive power of metaphoric overlay. But literary-critical *theory* uses these problems to undermine the possibility of theory in the sense of synoptic vision. It sees cultural incommensurability and metaphoric overlay as tools

for deconstructing theories about social and cultural matters. By contrast, the theory of theories to be developed here attempts to define its project as incorporating theoretical responses to cultural incommensurability and metaphoric overlay.

In face of these difficulties for a theory of theories, many philosophers attack the very notion of theory as a true synoptic vision, and that response must be considered. Because of incommensurability, no theory can be genuinely synoptic, they say. Rather, any theory pummels, bends, and trims things to fit them into its parochial terms by means of what Richard Rorty calls “forced re-descriptions.”²⁹ Better to give up synoptic vision, they say, and revel in the parochial vision with which one starts or which one can invent poet-like. This is a quasi-moral argument for the protection of things’ fragile integrity. Truth also is to be rejected as an ideal, some argue, because the very notion seems to suggest that there is a world that is non-linguistic or non-representational that could measure our assertions. Rather, our assertions are about other assertions, they say. Or, more subtly, the subtle web of discourse is only about discourse, perhaps about other discourses. To insist on the pursuit of true theories, they say, can only be to search for a way of dominating discourse, trying to force all participants to talk in the terms of one’s own theory. David Hall makes the point the following way:

Were one to take the broadest view of the Western philosophical tradition, the present anti-metaphysical stance, in either its positivist or postmodernist form, would be seen in terms of the emergence of the default nominalism which pervades the thinking of most who bother to look beyond their provincial perspectives in order to “hold their time in thought.” The search for either a general ontology (*ontologia generalis*), which advertises the unity and coherence of the world by expressing the Being of beings, or a science of first principles (*scientia universalis*), which characterizes things by appeal to general principles ordering the whole and underwriting our knowledge of it, has collapsed into a resigned anarchy embarrassed by any invocation of “essences” or “objective principles.”³⁰

Hall continues:

I have argued that appeals to logical and rational (objectivist) methods depend upon an explicit or tacit belief in the validity of an intellectual sensibility shaped by the ontological and cosmological concerns of the Anglo-European tradition expressed either in concepts such as Being, God, the Absolute, or norms such as Laws of Nature or the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The failure of the metaphysical tradition either in the form of a science of Being (*ontologia generalis*) or of principles (*scientia universalis*) has dissolved the context within which objectivist appeals are made viable. The failure of metaphysics has, of course, been expressed in various ways: “the Death of God,” “Positivism,” “the Forgetting of Being,” “the Rise of Modern Technology,” “Deconstruction.” Each of these names ideological implicates of the default nominalism characteristic of our contemporary coming of age.³¹

Perhaps Hall characterizes the Western metaphysical tradition too narrowly as a science of Being and principles, and so celebrates the failure of but a minor strand, indeed the strand of modernism.³² Nevertheless, he is right to characterize a large portion of our intellectual community as having moved to Rorty's "default nominalism," that is, the anti-theoretical nominalism of rhetoric and singular story that is left after all claims to theory have been abandoned.

Against this anti-theoretical intellectual protest against the particularities of theory, often identified with postmodernism itself and ably led by Rorty, careful arguments will have to be given. The best argument against the impossibility of something is an actual instance of it, the argument from *esse* to *posse*. Robert S. Corrington, in a recent systematic book advancing the metaphysics of Justus Buchler in conjunction with major themes of phenomenology, describes his approach this way:

Metaphysics, in this view, is not a spurious enterprise that wants to leap outside of the confines of the transcendental subject. Rather, it is the attempt to find the most basic categories through which phenomena (orders of relevance) can become available to the human process. To engage in metaphysics is to probe into the most generic features of a given order and to isolate those features for special treatment. This process moves from the less to the more generic, so that private or limited traits are located within larger orders of relevance. For many, of course, the question for the "generic" sounds like the imposition of identity onto material that is self-othering or marked by radical difference. It must be shown that the concern for the generic does not attempt to efface difference or novelty, but recognizes precisely how differences contribute to the trait constitution of orders of relevance. Put in other terms: generic-level analysis honors difference and allows such differences to enhance our understanding of the orders within which they appear.³³

Reserving the right to ask further questions about Corrington's approach, the present project can take comfort in the fact that at least some metaphysicians know the deconstructionist and other postmodern arguments, respect them, and move around them. It should be clear that a theory of theories with the three traits mentioned above, namely, characterizing synoptic vision, showing the conventionality of theoretical forms that are dialectically comparable, and identifying the truth in theories, and that also copes with the problems of incommensurability and metaphoric overlay, will have gone a long way to acknowledge and meet the objections of those who think theories are simply no longer possible or intellectually respectable.

Earlier in this section three claims against theory were noted that should be addressed specifically: (1) that parochial visions are better than theories because theories require forced descriptions, (2) that there is no real world about which to theorize anyway, only more discourses, and (3) that theoretical discourse amounts

to an attempt to dominate by requiring others to speak in one's own terms, which must reflect one's own interests to the neglect or exclusion of others. To these we now turn.

1. The question about parochial visions is not whether they are legitimate themselves but whether theories ought to be, or even can be, parochial. Reductive and instrumental theories legitimately can be parochial if they are clearly labelled as such, so that people are warned about their limitations. No one would expect a theory of molecular chemistry to prescribe how one ought to vote in a political election; when famous chemists speak as authorities on politics one should remember that whatever political credentials they have do not derive from chemistry. The question rather is whether putatively non-reductive theories legitimately can be parochial (of course, they will be practically parochial—that is part of their fallibility) and can also make efforts to surmount at least some of the parochialism to which they are liable.

Richard Rorty takes the admission of inevitable parochialism to be a mark of intellectual humility and then infers from there that it still is possible to construct peculiar synoptic visions by means of grand narratives of philosophic history. His grand narratives are every bit as much theories in their way as Plato's about justice, or Carnap's about language, or Hegel's about the development of Spirit. They claim to be true synoptic visions whose formal terms are other philosopher's positions and the matters that enter into intellectual influence, refutation, development, and so forth; his narratives are true or false, or contain truthful and false elements. The narratives are to be treated as hypotheses.

Rorty correctly recognizes that the formal structure of narrative requires the selective representation of the philosophers brought into the story because only that part of their work is registered in the story that fits it.³⁴ So, for instance, his grand narrative of modern philosophy tells of the downfall of foundationalism and the rise of pragmatism. James' pragmatism fits his story well; only part of Dewey's pragmatism fits, and he must reject the rest through misdescription and neglect other parts; and Peirce's pragmatism does not fit at all. Metaphysics is supposed by his grand narrative not to fit the move toward pragmatism because it is foundationalistic. But Rorty's story rejects metaphysicians such as Whitehead, Peirce, Hartshorne, and Weiss, simply because they have metaphysical theories, though none of them is a foundationalist.³⁵ Rorty calls this feature of his thought "strong misreading." Precisely because a philosopher's grand narratives are parochial, the philosopher, he argues, has license to misread in order to focus the narrative.

Rorty has confused two kinds of use of the history of philosophy here. One is the reconstructive use, employed by every philosopher after Thales, of picking from antecedent philosophers' ideas to be modified and developed in one's own philosophy. The purpose of citation here is threefold: to take advantage of ideas

already worked out, to give credit where it is due, and to advertise the legitimacy of one's own philosophy by showing that it falls within an historical line of distinction. Citation of an antecedent philosopher in the reconstructive mode by itself makes no attempt to represent the nature or significance of the philosopher's work beyond the ideas cited. So, for instance, Whitehead paid unexpected compliments to Descartes for ideas concerning the subjectivity of experience, and equally unexpected compliments to Locke for certain ideas of metaphysical use; but he never said that these ideas characterized the whole of those philosophers' positions nor that Descartes was not a metaphysical rationalist while Locke an empiricist.³⁶ Similarly the above reconstructive appropriation of Plato's ideas about theory in *The Republic* makes no claim that these ideas represent the whole of his position or of its significance.

While Rorty's use of Dewey may be reconstructive in this sense, he confuses this use with the interpretation of Dewey's position. Instead of attempting a balanced view that takes into account the many sides of Dewey's philosophy, he uses the parts he likes to interpret the whole, cutting off the rest without careful consideration.³⁷ Furthermore, Rorty is quite clear that his subject matter is not a systematic position of his own that uses ideas selectively from antecedent philosophers; rather it is a story about the history of modern philosophy. From that story, readers make inferences about who is important and why. Even worse than being cited selectively is being ignored, for the ignored philosophers, such as the speculative metaphysicians mentioned above, then drop out of the history.

In fairness to the philosophers of the modern period, a grand narrative ought not to be parochial where that can be helped. Simple, punchy, well-focused narratives fail to honor and register the singularity of some leading modern thinkers. So with all narratives, indeed all theories that attempt to represent and explain their subject matter: parochialism ought to be guarded against with great care.

2. The second charge against the project of understanding theory philosophically is that, although theories generally are assumed to be about the world, there is no real world for them to be about. Reductive and instrumentalist theories might be about discourses, but the chief burden of non-reductionist theories is accurately to describe the world. The defense of realism against this kind of objection is not the topic here, although that was the topic of my *Recovery of the Measure*. A more recent diagnosis and treatment of the late Kantian motives behind the now popular claims that there is no real world, that the world of experience is a construct of our own making, reflecting our own values, is David Weissman's important book, *Truth's Debt to Value*. In it he writes:

Talk of world-making is, however, more than a way of exalting our affective and cognitive freedom; it is more than an intellectual conceit. This is also the grandiose description-cum-justification for a social practice. Behaving as though the world