

# *Is freedom worth the risk? – Liberalism and the challenge of Dostoyevsky*

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## **Abstract**

*Most contemporary liberal thought is concerned with the institutional framework within which we may live our lives. It is, therefore, a mundane or earthly thought, i.e. it renounces what it derisively calls metaphysical speculation on the good life. I want to argue here that the mundanity of liberal thought hinders its understanding of the liberal order. The kernel of truth of that order I take to be (still): the transcendent dignity of human beings. Since the old philosophical vocabularies that established this dignity are now regarded as obsolete, I indicate with this term merely that an individual person is more than what she presents herself to be; that the person is more than the sum of experiences, achievements, comportments, and choices she has taken so far. Contemporary liberal thought must do more than merely acknowledge this – which it often does. It must think it. That is, liberal thought must become metaphysical.*

**Key words:** *freedom, liberalism, metaphysics, Dostoyevsky, ideology*

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## Introduction

Most contemporary liberal thought is concerned with the institutional framework within which we may live our lives. It is, therefore, a mundane or earthly thought, *i.e.* it renounces what it derisively calls metaphysical speculation on the good life. I want to argue here that the mundanity of liberal thought hinders its understanding of the liberal order.<sup>2</sup> The kernel of truth of that order I take to be (still): the transcendent dignity of human beings. Since the old philosophical vocabularies that established this dignity are now regarded as obsolete, I indicate with this term merely that an individual person is more than what she presents herself to be; that the person is more than the sum of experiences, achievements, comportments, and choices she has taken so far. Contemporary liberal thought must do more than merely acknowledge this – which it often does. It must think it. That is, liberal thought must become metaphysical. If not, then liberalism may become unable to answer affirmatively the question from which it sprang: is freedom worth the risk? In this time of radical political transformations West and East, I take this to be (still) *the* question facing liberals.

I illustrate the meaning of this challenge by way of Dostoyevsky's Legend of the Grand Inquisitor from *The Brothers Karamazov* (Riemer 1957; Sandoz 1978; 2000; Avramenko et. al. 2013). I read the encounter between the Inquisitor and resurrected Christ as a parable of the critical mismatch between the bounded, mundane quality of liberal reason and the boundless, non-mundane experiential resources that constitute liberal order. In a second step, I point to two indications that liberalism can bring the two in harmony. First, liberalism has shown itself to be in practice, if not always in theory, an open-ended symbolism that continuously reaches beyond itself to resources that are not within really-existing, mundane liberalism.<sup>3</sup> Second, the untheorized traces of this movement are already

<sup>2</sup> The term "liberal order" refers to the variety of modern efforts – philosophical, political or otherwise – that have understood themselves to be liberal and contributing to liberal causes. It therefore refers to a befuddlingly broad plurality of discourses, political movements, symbolic articulations and ideological encrustations whose lines of transmissions often lead to historical dead ends, crisscross, combat or merge into each other. The term order indicates that these, experiences, symbols, movements and actors are not wholly devoid of intelligibility. By the term "contemporary liberal theory" I designate those philosophical efforts – political, egalitarian, deliberative, pragmatic etc. – that have attempted to rationally illumine the conditions, nature and ends of liberalism in our time.

<sup>3</sup> It is this openness that – beyond guns and butter – may have helped it beat its communist and fascist challengers, which proved to be symbolically closed or, as is often said, 'ideological.' The term "symbol" here refers to a quality of linguistic terms to continuously refer to the experiences that have engendered them. Liberal language then has exhibited symbolic openness in the sense that particular concepts (*i.e.*, freedom, rights etc.) have refused to be "closed", into completely mundane definitions. The alternatives to liberalism proved to be "symbolically-closed" in the sense that they broke the connection between

experientially present in many of the most representative thinkers of liberal thought. The mismatch between language and experience however, means that the necessarily non-mundane movement of thought-experience that sustains liberal theorizing is covered up by the language, and loses its reality. In the third and final part I point to the possibilities correcting this mismatch. The recovery of older strands of philosophy with their rich non-mundane symbolisms may provide help in loosening the mundane hinges of contemporary liberal thought. But that may only help get us going by allowing us to recognize our own experiences; the task remains ours, and not of long dead philosophers.

## The crisis of contemporary liberal theory

I begin with the diagnosis: contemporary liberal theory is in disharmony with the liberal order it seeks to understand. Thinking about liberalism, liberal theory tells us, means thinking about the overarching framework in which competing articulations, life-plans and goods may struggle. In other words, liberalism is the one practice that does not need to be practically actualized as practices usually are; by pursuing the ends appropriate to them. Accordingly, much of liberal theory is constituted by arguments on the kinds of arrangements that provide the best framework – arguments that move along the surface of liberal order. Perhaps it is appropriate to compare this movement of liberal thought along the surface of order in complex conceptual arguments on rights and protections and away from the living, practical nature of that order, to the move away from justice towards litigation witnessed by us all in the contemporary world.

Liberal theory has bet on articulating an agreement about that neutral framework and, upon failure to reach that agreement, has tended to retreat ever more from the very effort of articulation.<sup>4</sup> Its famous prioritization of the right over the good has dissolved in face of the recognition that there is no right that is compatible with every conception of the good and, more importantly,

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language, experience, and reality, and closed themselves behind the walls of their own language. For a philosophical example of language closing itself off reality, see Voegelin (1990) analysis of Heidegger. And for a warning against mistaking even the most profound philosophical symbolization for the reality to which it refers, see Plato's *Seventh Letter* (Bluck 2012).

<sup>4</sup> By way of example, cf. the great arc of liberal theorizing that begins with Rawls' confident justification of liberal principles in Rawls (1971), flattens out into the elegant constructions of Gewirth (1979) and Nozick (1974) that serve as rationalizations of (their kinds of) liberalism by liberals for liberals, elegantly declines into Dworkin's (1977; 1986) retreat into principles internal to the tradition, sputters into a halt with the recognition that the tradition itself has reached its end in Gray (1989), and fractures into the abandonment of efforts at justification altogether in favor of historical contingency in Richard Rorty (1989). There are, of course, other kinds of liberal theory such as Aristotelian (Joseph Raz) or critical (Jürgen Habermas). Although both escape the problematic flattening out of the more Anglo-American tradition, the focus on framework remains.

that right cannot be thought of without a conception of the good. The answer has been that the good, when admitted, is merely stated rather than pursued. No one exemplifies the liberal retreat from the search for order into history better than the late Richard Rorty who, convinced that the search has been a cruel mistake, undermines truth itself as a project. Instead of truth, we are to accept a feeling (of sympathy with the suffering of others). But why should we be ruled by this feeling in the absence of good reasons? *Why* indeed should we submit to what is merely a historically-inherited convention (liberal order)? *How* do we even begin to submit to what does not claim to be true or just? And finally, if John Gray (1989) is right, to *what* do we submit when “the cultural tradition which gave [...] birth [to liberalism] and sustained it to maturity” is no longer there? Philosophy collapses into history, history collapses into itself, and the liberal tradition of neutrality culminates in becoming neutral about itself.<sup>5</sup>

But insofar as it is a practice, liberalism is not a framework where diverging worldviews co-exist but a continuous, positive movement toward the recovery and actualization of a just political order. The liberal experience exists logically and actually prior to its theoretical constructs. And the fact that it is practiced, points to the possibility that the reality of liberalism is not contained in the arguments liberal theory has produced to make it transparent. Therefore, the fate of liberalism is not co-eval with that of liberal theory.<sup>6</sup> The site of liberalism may not be in arguments but in the almost pre-discursive faith that mobilizes intellectual reasons; in the experience that seeks and articulates itself. The inward collapse of liberal theory is mismatched with the enduring moral and experiential appeal of the liberal order. Isn't the task of good theory – just like the task of good practice – to magnify and expand this pre-analytic sense of right order which gives its reflection a reason and a direction? Isn't it then possible that not the *search* to articulate the order, but the *direction* of that search along the surface of order, is miss-directed?

To reflect on the stakes of this, I turn to Dostoyevsky's Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.<sup>7</sup> In the Legend, two symbolic-figures – the Cardinal Grand

<sup>5</sup> Recall Rorty's touching inability to imagine what to say when the secret police come knocking for the innocent. It is, he says “a hard saying ... that there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves.” It is simply the case that fascism will have become the truth as Sartre put it. Compare Rorty with a poorer theoretician, Albert Camus: “What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation [...] When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical.” (Rorty, 1982; Camus 1956).

<sup>6</sup> Witness the historical period between the late nineteenth century and John Rawls *A Theory of Justice*. Liberal theory had fallen almost completely silent, and to be a thoughtful person meant to be almost anything but a liberal. Nevertheless, this was also the time when the liberal order practically marshalled the resources necessary to defeat its most dangerous challengers.

<sup>7</sup> Not only Dostoyevsky's writing, but also his own experiential movement, described in his autobiography,

Inquisitor and Christ - are struggling with one another. The Inquisitor is a serious man that has applied his reason mundanely<sup>8</sup> to build an order that has rescued people from the “useless suffering” of God’s freedom in order to better enjoy the fruits of His creation. Christ, on the other hand, represents a double-symbolism; the symbol of “freedom” that haunts even the best order, refusing its permanent stabilization. And the symbol of “limitless,” “boundless” or unconditional love.<sup>9</sup> But the two are perhaps one; after all, as Terry Eagleton (2009) nicely put it, God is able to let us be (free), precisely *because* he is boundless and does not need us. At any rate, the confrontation occurs in XVI century Seville where the Church has taken matters in its own hands and is burning the recalcitrant at the stake. In this setting returns the silent Christ. The Inquisitor recognizes and arrests Him determined to burn Him at the stake. The night before the execution, for no self-evident reason, he descends in the dungeon to confront the silent prisoner. The Grand Inquisitor proceeds to justify the reasons for the order established by the church; an order that has robbed the poor and destitute of their hollow freedom, in order to grant them safety, security and contentment. He is cognizant that this is contrary to the free order of God, but his reasoning is impeccable from his own mundane perspective. Like God, he too acted out of love of mankind.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in the end, kissed by the silent Christ, he opens the door and lets Him go. For the moment, what interests me is the relationship between the *silent love* of Christ and the political eloquence, the *verbose love*, of the Inquisitor. The Inquisitor engages in mundane argumentative speech - we can all follow his reasoning along and be moved by it. In this he follows *the* stratagem of liberal thought. But note that the Inquisitor himself is *not* moved by his own speech. As his argument reaches its culmination, his speech falters although iron logic is on his side. At the very end, it is the speechless Christ that *moves* him. We know this because instead of burning the Messiah the next day in the central square, he opens the door of the cell and lets Him go free thus putting the mundane order of the Church in radical danger. But it does not move him wholly; “the kiss burns his heart, but the old man remains firm in his own ideas and unbelief.” What happened?

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from a kind of liberalism, downwards to nihilism and then back up, indicates the problem and the way out (Dostoyevsky 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Testimony is sprinkled throughout the Inquisitor’s speech but is, more evident, in the very movement of his reason. Examples: “Everything was given over by Thee to the Pope, and everything now rests with him alone”; “the terrestrial spirit”, “the kingdom of the world and Caesar’s purple”. Feodor Dostoyevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor,” trans. H. B. Blavatsky, <http://envs.ucsc.edu/internships/available-internships/new-internships/reading-legend-of-grand-inquisitor.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> “Thou who lovest him more than Thyself!”

<sup>10</sup> “Did not we show our great love for humanity, by realizing in such a humble spirit its helplessness, by so mercifully lightening its burden...”

## Mismatch

In *The Legend*, argumentative reason pleads with speechlessness and loses. There are two reasons for this that are important here. The first is that the real movement in the Dialogue is not *in* the arguments of the Inquisitor, but the movement *of the Inquisitor* – he acknowledges it by opening the door of the cell after having first given every conceivable reason why Christ should burn at the stake. The movement is personal, factual and real, but remains unable to mobilize intellectual reasoning (hence the old man doesn't change his mind). The second is the indication that a serious commitment to freedom cannot be sustained without a deep faith that all that is lost in freedom will somehow be redeemed. The site of that faith is what non-philosophical people still call a "soul" or a "heart" ("the kiss burns his heart"). The task then is to bring the source of liberal freedom out of obscurity and back to reality; to make sense of it theoretically, rather than (merely) in song, literature or conversations among friends. In other words, the task is the same as the oldest concern of very old philosophical books: making sense of the human soul and its movements.

This task is not as impossible as it first sounds. As *The Legend* indicates, the remarkable endurance of liberal practice suggests that the liberal core lies outside of the quality of arguments liberalism has produced to buttress it. The site of liberalism is *not* in the arguments. A well-known illustration: witness Isaiah Berlin's (1958) call to stand by one's principles "unflinchingly" even though one knows "the relative validity of one's convictions." The issue for Berlin is not so much the "relative validity" – which liberals love repeating again and again and have turned into a center-piece of their thinking – but their relativity vis-à-vis a felt absolute – the liberal core of Isaiah Berlin. It is because Berlin is witness to the absolute truth of his liberalism that he plays the bad philosopher and calls for unflinchingly supporting relative truths that he himself is not unflinchingly convinced of. What is this experiential movement that plunges beyond the ken of Berlin's language? This is metaphysics. It is precisely the same movement that occurs in the *Republic* of Plato or in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. To understand the endurance of liberalism and therefore to defend liberalism we must bear witness to this movement and speak metaphysically.

Liberal writings are actually replete with remarks of this nature. In page 3 of his *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls expresses the conviction that animates his theoretical effort: "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override." The unfolding of the Rawlsian philosophy occurs from the conviction of the transcendent value of each individual.

When he finally does ask why we should be just in the final page of *A Theory of Justice* – a question Plato dedicated a book, not a page to – his answer is that it realizes our spiritual nature. We accept the conditions of fairness in the original position because they speak to the depth of our nature: “Thus to see our place in society from the perspective of this position is to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view.” We have thus come to the “unseen measure” of the metaphysicians. Again, Rawls: “Purity of heart, if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from this point of view.” Not only the language but the very concern underlying the argument speaks of the same realization. *A Theory of Justice* proclaims that the incommensurable uniqueness of every person is so beyond measure that it cannot be left up to the contingency of politics. In another example, Rorty (2011) does the same when he states, “[wh]en the two come into conflict, democracy takes precedence over philosophy.” That simply means that the order is prior to the reasons adduced for it.<sup>11</sup> This movement that breaks through the hard surface shell is experiential. Theory can faithfully follow it to make it transparent and enlarge it, but an anti-metaphysical theory does not mean that our lives are shorn of metaphysical depth.

## Challenge

The problem for contemporary liberalism is that its defense necessarily requires an acknowledgement of this non-mundane movement from surface to depth. The liberal feeling of the transcendent dignity of the person is almost un conveyable in our mundane language except as a label we put on the source of our intimations. That is why it is often imputed by inadequate concepts such as “pluralism” or “life-plan” rather than theoretically illumined. We ought to embark on this thinking adventure. To indicate what such an adventure means, let us return one more time to Dostoyevsky’s Inquisitor.

Recall that Christ is arrested by the Inquisitor who descends in the dungeon to confront him. Why bother? We do not know for sure (mundanely-speaking there seems to be no good reason), but perhaps the Inquisitor is pulled towards a conversation with Christ in order to test the strength and goodness of his own

<sup>11</sup> This move away from the surface occurs often with the same thinker as he matures. It is evident in Nozick’s turn away from the brilliant surface construction of *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) to the existential nature of the problem in *The Examined Life* (1989): “How would we view ethics if we *did* trust our inclinations? We then might see it as an amplification of our good inclinations, as enlarging, regularizing, and channeling them, as telling how to become light’s vessel and transmitter. If the theoretical building of foundations for ethics is born of distrust of light’s allure – that is, distrust of our configuration of desires – then the task is not to buttress that light by argument, but to turn ourselves into beings who then can trust our inclinations.”

resolve. The Inquisitor is a serious man determined to put himself to the test. The challenge for Dostoyevsky, however, may be tougher than for Plato or St. Augustine, for he presents us with a ‘painting’ where the two symbols – the mundane and its beyond – are given separate forms. But of course, the two are not separate like two objects – the beyond certainly does not exist without the mundane to which, after all, belong the ‘mind’s eye’ that perceive it, or the heart that extends to it – but exist in tension with each other.<sup>12</sup> The challenge for Dostoyevsky is to find a means to depict the undepictable; to make seen the ‘unseen measure’ of old theologians and metaphysicians. His solution is to make the unseen visible in the impact that it has on the seen – on its effect on the Inquisitor (Christ Himself remains a ghostly albeit unmistakable presence throughout; recognizable only through His effects on others). His discourse begins from reasons that justify the mundane order and culminates in their collapse. The mundane collapses by way of the resonance of trans-mundane faith that the seriousness and honesty of the Inquisitor smuggles in. Christ’s reality is established beyond question by means of the depth and intensity of responses he evokes in the old Cardinal. As the dialogue between the prisoner and the interrogator continues, we see that it is the Cardinal, and not Christ, that is under interrogation from the start.

It is important to note that the Inquisitor is up to the challenge of a fierce interrogation. His performance is powerful and honest – he has consciously sacrificed his own soul<sup>13</sup> in order to save the wretched millions; the “half-finished samples of humanity created in mockery” to a freedom they would never be able to use. He has “corrected and improved [Christ’s] teaching” which consisted of nothing but “pride.”<sup>14</sup> And, mundanely speaking, the facts do not refute him: “the people feel fully sure and satisfied”, “thousands of millions of happy infants free from any sin.” It would be nonsensical, from the Cardinal’s perspective, to even compare his construct to Christ’s for “even supposing that thousands and tens of thousands follow Thee in the name of, and for the sake of Thy heavenly bread, what will become of the millions and hundreds of millions of human beings too weak to scorn the earthly for the sake of Thy heavenly bread?”. But as he speaks the *momentum* of his answer undermines the answer. Is there not something despicable about human beings that have given up their freedom – have they not lost all that made them worth serving in the first place? The Inquisitor cannot conceal the contempt he harbors for

<sup>12</sup> The religious prohibition of its iconic depiction is therefore as understandable as the well-founded indignation of contemporary thought against the old, “two-world” metaphysical theories.

<sup>13</sup> “We take all these sins upon ourselves, for we so love the world, that we are even willing to sacrifice our souls for its satisfaction.”

<sup>14</sup> This brings to mind liberalism’s beginnings as the philosophy dedicated to subduing the proud. Recall that Hobbes (2008) Leviathan is the “king of the proud.”



the very beings for whom he has sacrificed his soul.<sup>15</sup> What began in loving service has ended in contemptuous domination.

The collapse of the Old Man does not occur because of an inner crack in his reasoning, but because his reasoning movement glides strictly along the surface of order alone. From the surface, all looks well and the millions are content. But from that same surface, he is unable to grasp the *telos* of his order towards injustice. We, however, who witness the confrontation with the trans-mundane symbol, can uncover the inner contradiction of the Cardinal's achievement: out of love for them, he has deprived human beings of all that makes them lovable. But I for one have never heard of a love whose *telos* is contempt, a love whose experience lowers the lovers. One cannot but wonder whether the beginning of the Inquisitor's quest was not love at all but some sort of learned abstraction of it. In the dialogue, love of human beings, that immense love that could mobilize one in the service of multitudes one does not know, is possible either through abstractions or through Christ. The former has fallen. The latter still remains.

The liberal claim is a claim that can be intuited but not fully validated because it reaches into regions beyond the mundanely appearing. Herein lies the inability of contemporary liberal thinkers to give an account of their own convictions – a failure that is a failure only because of the mundane standards that they themselves have set up.<sup>16</sup> At its core liberal thought (and practice) is a searching movement for a truth that is already present. But that truth – something like the unconditional worth of a person, let us say – cannot be sustained by itself. It depends on the recognition in thought and language that the person is always more, infinitely more, than what we see in front of us. The challenge then is to allow that which is *not present* to govern that which *is*.

That is, liberals can answer the question: “Is liberty worth the risk?” in the positive only if they believe in redemption – the assurance that somehow, somewhere all that is lost in freedom is restored to us manifold; that freedom presupposes an order beyond itself. They must have a faith that the Inquisitor “who killed all his young life in asceticism in the desert, and yet could not cure himself of his love towards his fellowmen” lost by miss-direction. But this is another way of saying that their belief is the experiential equivalent of the faith in the resurrection of Christ or the theory of knowledge of Socrates (Plato 1976). There we are, within yet beyond liberalism. We note the assurance of redemption in liberals, Christians and Platonists and we begin to wonder whether it is part of the human condition, not of the human consolation. This faith points to a radical movement beyond all finite conditions. The liberal language of revering rights is perhaps its refraction in a secular political universe.

<sup>15</sup> “for they are weak, vicious, miserable, nonentities born wicked and rebellious.”

<sup>16</sup> Taylor (1989) has pointed to this inability of liberal thinkers to “[come] clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking”.

## Recovery?

The problem then is recovering a language that is appropriate to the experience. All we have is evidence of a lack but we remain unclear on what it means to respond. Here I limit myself to one testimony of its recovery and to one speculation of what may help. First, the bearing witness: the twentieth century prison-camp literature bears testimony to the capacity to recover. In the most nihilistic of environments of a nihilistic age, these individuals witnessed the imposition of moral reality almost without the availability of linguistic formulations. One may say that they were *compelled* to symbolize – to reinvent – a language of expression to illumine their own experiences of order (Solzhenitsyn 1974–78; Frankl 1983; Hillesum 1983, Valladares 1986; Cheng 1987; Havel 1988; 1992). And they did it. But theirs is perhaps a particular symbolism that reaches easier fellow sufferers or the like-minded; it lacks the transparency of philosophical symbolization that moves it beyond its validity for a time and place.

Second, the speculation: it may help to go through those theoretical traditions which did develop appropriate symbolizations in order to recognize one's own experiences of order. This requires taking seriously classical philosophy. And it is perhaps no mere coincidence that in the twentieth century we have witnessed a remarkable appropriation of classical and medieval thinkers in ways that centuries prior had forgotten.

The experiential movement that begs articulation is not some pie-in-the-sky piece of metaphysics. So far, I have referred to paradigmatic examples only: Dostoyevsky, but also Solzhenitsyn and Václav Havel. But one does not need to be an exceptional person for the originary experiences are available to everyone. One does not need a “silent Christ” or an awareness of death, or a “limit situation” (*Grenzsituation*). Human beings always and everywhere live as if their life were eternal. They ask questions about what is not present. They are never wholly absorbed in the particular mundane projects that seem to occupy them. They are never fully satisfied with the mundane results. They are always already beyond what *seems* to be.

The turn to experience that has occurred in areas of theory – but never fully seeped in liberal thought – is a definite advance in the right direction. But I believe it will remain a mere gesture, if it fails to grasp the movement we evoked here as the structure of *all* human experience. Consider the everyday. I say I am having an experience whenever I am taken out of myself – whenever “I lose myself” as the saying goes. It is in these moments that I most “find myself.” So, I am most truly myself when I am most “beyond myself”. The structure of experience insofar as

it is meaningful, is the movement beyond the evident – a reaching out, an open extension of oneself. It is a recovery of reality that is more than the sum of its parts, evident whether in playing music or in the enjoyment of friendship. There is nothing exalted or unique about this – we have these experiences all the time and it is these that form us and we give accounts of to each other.

And, what is more, the ancients did not know any better than us; although they did have the advantage of not having to remove any anti-metaphysical scales from their eyes. Ours is the same condition faced by the interlocutors in Plato's *Republic* whose meeting in Piraeus is motivated by nothing other than a desire to move beyond the mundane understandings of (in)justice in order to live well. In each case, there is no reliable principle, model or custom to provide any guidance. The individual souls are thrown back on their own resources and discover the lack. There they recognize how easily they are misled by the really-existing and the space for a helper – Socrates – opens up (Voegelin 2000). You may recall that in Book 2, Glaucon and Adeimantus recount the contradictory pressures of practicing injustice while paying lip service to justice. But they also sense the depth of viciousness of that sort of mundane existence although they can find no good arguments to marshal against it. What the *Republic* reveals when read in this way is the meditative opening of the soul to what is already in it. Socrates faces the whole gamut of what we have called surface arguments – Thrasymachus the anti-moralist; Glaucon the social contract theorist; Adeimantus the theo-dogmatist, Cephalus the traditionalist, Polemarchus the “tit for tat” conventionalist – and decisively pushes beyond them. In the end, it seems that hardly anything has changed (Socrates definition rather recalls Polemarchus' and Cephalus' definitions of giving each his due). But in the push beyond what is, they have achieved what they sat out to do; to discard their own arguments that hindered their own movements towards justice. Once the disharmonious will to power that all elaborate so eloquently at the beginning is broken, reality is not lost but restored.

The relentless pressure of reality has already brought us to the gates of *The Republic*. We look backward at an age that began in the glorious expectations of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and the energies of scientific, industrial and political revolutions and culminated in the perverse mediocrities of the twentieth century. And the moment of relief, that liberal *end* of history, is also behind us. From inside, as our political constructions, bulking under the contradictory pressures of our own unreal dreams, threaten to drop us back “in history.” And, from the outside, as the barbarism of some time ago in Paris calls us to become “mired in history” (Fukuyama 1992). And we are not resourceless. Support for the ideological mass movements – whether in academia or outside – has evaporated as if they were not even there. What understanding and persuasion could not accomplish has now come about through the actual movement of experience. But that kindness

has its own Janus-face. The dominant forces that propelled the modern world – and that compel our submission to what we thought were our tools – are the same in nature and far more intense in practice. They can neither be surrendered, nor be surrendered to; and liberal thought has neither wholly rejected nor wholly embraced them. But *their* rationality is bounded by the “iron cage” (*tahlhartes Gehäuse*) (Weber 1992) within which they seek to trap us. *Ours* is boundless. The pervasive homogeneity and domination of our world is continuously undermined by the awareness of its own source in the freedom that makes it possible. We *already* know, from the achievements of twentieth century philosophy – rather than liberal theory – that we cannot live in a world that is exposed as our own construct. It remains for us to think about how we *ought* to live in.

## About the author

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