

Review

Who needs a world view?

Raymond Geuss

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In your sleep or relentlessly awake, rehearse reasons. Yes, I balled up my hands, no not making a fist but because I was scared that they would break my fingers. *Why were you resisting? Why were you there?* Cross-examinations refract through the half-remembered face of that primary school teacher who took a dislike, complained of your ‘look of defiance’ on parents’ evening. *Do you really think it’s very ladylike in such a manner to hold yourself?* Why do you exist? *It’s not going to help your cause, is it?*

‘Perhaps the Enlightenment was mistaken to jump to the conclusion that life was like a continuing court case, in which it was imperative to come, quickly and efficiently, to definitive judgments about what was “true” and what “false”; what was “legitimate” and what “illegitimate”; and what was “justified” and what “not justified”’ (p. 58), writes Raymond Geuss. It is impermissible not to know why your leg twitched as they forced you against the concrete, why that patch of grass is so implausibly large in your memory. Absolutely unjustifiable not to know why digging dried leaves out of black kids should be anyone’s duty to execute; or why duty is supposed to be so great in the first place. *Be reasonable*, they hiss in your ear as they cut off your clothes. Their statements say they didn’t hurt you; they say they hurt you because you deserved it. You will insist these can’t be true together. They are contradicting themselves and you will use logic to vanquish them. Scratch the justifications into your self. You won’t be allowed notes on the stand (although they will).

That making yourself defensible can be an all-consuming and traumatic process is an observation likely to resonate with anyone who has stood in the dock or attended a philosophy conference. Even in the best-case scenario, whatever vindication the court, the discipline, or the Tribunal of Pure Reason can offer may not undo the damage that subjection to its requirements has inflicted. It will take a quite other process, a therapeutic one, perhaps, to un-batten the hatches on the disconnected, ambiguity-intolerant, *legitimate* subjects it has made of us, to let the playful, fluid element back in.

Who Needs a Worldview? needs no defence. A radiantly erudite but utterly unpretentious course of therapy, it invites readers to experience something and be transformed by it. Bouncing through philosophical traditions, between history, politics, aesthetics, and biographical reflection, stretching connections like electric lines between cities only to plunge us the next moment into the detailed reading of a snapshot, an unexpected perspective on an irreducibly particular context which cannot be beamed up into an overarching thesis without bursting like a soap bubble: this book resists tidy summary and it’s not sorry. There is in this sense a congruence of form and philosophical message in Geuss’s work of which the purportedly methodical gatekeepers of disciplinary propriety can only dream.

The inability to tolerate ‘ambiguity, indeterminacy, and anything that renders boundaries indistinct or straddles them’, which Geuss identifies it as ‘a distinctive deficiency of the

Enlightenment’ to have ‘gloried in’ (p. 58), is likewise criticised by abolitionists today as ideological fuel and consequence of a carceral society. This is a society undergirded by institutions like police, prisons, and borders, that use the alchemy of violence to turn over-rigid binaries to the ‘production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death’ – as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007, 28) defines racism.

A significant contribution of Geuss’s work over the years has been its incisive use of Marxist critiques of utopianism to expose the status-quo affirming tendencies of the ‘ideal theories’ of John Rawls and his footnote writers. Sitting in our armchairs inventing ideal societies ‘assumes that we have too much cognitive ability to detach ourselves from the world we actually live in, to “jump over our own shadow”, as Hegel put it’; our wildest imaginings often ‘turn out to have some of the same basic defects of the present, merely magnified’ (p. 111). In *Who Needs A Worldview?*, Geuss reflects on how these critiques, while correct as far as they go, are not ‘the last word on utopianism’ (p. 111). He draws on anarchist Gustav Landauer’s account of ‘utopian impulses’ as those irredeemably excessive forms of hope and desire that, despite or even because of their excess, play an indispensable motivating role in ‘driving humanity on from one topos – from one ‘place’ – to the next’.

We might find this generative for understanding the ‘prefigurative’ character of abolitionist efforts to ‘craft resistance practices that instantiate desired future relations in ways that can seem hopeless against the institutional power of the state and the investments in racial dominance that underpins its actions’ (Kemp 2022, 1). Abolitionism is a utopian politics in an obvious sense, imagining a world that does not rely on the cruelty normalised in policing to enforce its stratifications and (barely) keep a lid on its endless crises. Belying the naivety with which they are often charged, the practitioners of abolition generally recognise the entrenchment and viciousness of carceral violence in far greater fullness than the liberals who churn out its abstracted apologia. Geuss opens space to see how a certain ‘unreasonableness’ in refusing to give up on living, now, in dangerously dreamlike orientation to a place that is not and most likely will never be, might be exactly what the world needs – and what we need to view it aright, in the times and places that matter.

‘Desire opened their eyes to something’ (p. 122), he writes, embracing the queer realisation that the value of desiring lies not only in getting what you desire. As Jack Halberstam puts it, ‘failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world’ (Halberstam 2011, 2). Disembarking the capitalist, patriarchal, hetero- and mono-normative (etc.) success train and shamelessly desiring the currently unavailable may bring its own as yet unimaginable rewards.

Philosophy is a practical activity, always conditioned by history and sometimes affecting it in turn – for better or worse. Its concepts ‘get their content through their social context and through the history which is in part the history of the institutions in which they are embedded’ (2020, 81–82). Critical genealogies of the concept ‘human’ at the heart of liberal discourses, practices, and institutions of human rights, humanitarianism, and humanist philosophy reveal its intimate entanglements with the colonial violence it has legitimised, and the excluded Others against which it has been defined, as Julietta Singh (2018) argues. Scholarly imperatives toward disciplinary mastery reproduce this valorisation of a conqueror-subjectivity when they assume that advancing armies of arguments in tight formation, achieving total oversight and control of an intellectual territory, is always equivalent to thinking well.

Geuss's reflections on liberalism as (in the view of his own vividly remembered schoolteacher) 'a particularly debased and etiolated form of ancient humanism' (p. x) resonate with decolonial critiques of humanism's assumed master-subject, and of politics that 'hinge on a fantasy and relentless enforcement of human distinctiveness' (Singh 2018, 29). The quiet dedication of the book to his dear departed feline comrade Tabitha forge precisely the kind of 'dehumanist solidarities' Singh traces through her own companionship with Cassie the "'wild" cat' turned friend and co-parent (2018, 1, 123, 129). His text, like Halberstam's, might be described as a 'utopic summons to inhabit and embrace our failures' (Singh 2018, 161) – what Singh celebrates as 'a queer refusal of mastery' (2018, 21).

Despite these and other political-philosophical affinities, explicit engagement with feminist, queer and decolonial thinkers is a noticeable absence, here as in Geuss's other work. Yet his devastating account of the post-Rawlsian philosophical establishment's complicity with neo-imperial militarism in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq must go down as one of the most nuanced burns ever published (Geuss 2009). When students occupied a university building in protest at that year's bombing of Gaza, he was there.

There's something to be said here about making use of the distinctive tools and skills that you, formed through your own idiosyncratic history, have at your disposal in the particular contexts you find yourself; accepting fracture and incompleteness rather than having to encompass everything valuable everywhere all at once; about diversity of tactics. Would we love to read Geuss connect his thoughts on Hegel with Frantz Fanon, Lenin with Amílcar Cabral, Adorno with Angela Davis? Yes. Will we love him just the same if he never does? Yes. He makes room for others.

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