

A LIFE OF LEARNING

Judith N. Shklar

Charles Homer Haskins
Lecture for 1989



American Council of Learned Societies

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by

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Introduction

Judith N. Shklar is the John Cowles Professor of Government at Harvard University. She was born in Riga, Latvia and received the B.A. and M.A. degrees from McGill University in 1949 and 1950. She earned her Ph.D. at Harvard in 1955. She has served as president of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy and as vice president of the American Political Science Association. At the time of the Haskins Lecture, she was President Elect of the American Political Science Association.

Professor Shklar has held fellowships from the American Association of University Women, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and All Souls College, Oxford. She has been a Fellow of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. In 1986, she was the Carlyle Lecturer at Oxford, and in 1988, the Storrs Lecturer at Yale. She has spent her entire academic career as a member of the Harvard University faculty. Professor Shklar is the author or editor of seven books, including *After Utopia*, *Legalism*, *Men and Citizens*, *Freedom and Independence*, *Ordinary Vices*, and *Montesquieu* as well as numerous articles in distinguished collections and such journals as *Daedalus*, *The American Political Science Review*, *The Political Science Quarterly*, *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, *Political Theory*, *Social Research*, and *The Yale Law Journal*. A renowned teacher of graduate students and undergraduates alike, Judith Shklar has also served as the Pitt Professor of American History and Institutions at Cambridge University.

Professor Shklar's lecture exhibits all the characteristic traits that prompted ACLS to invite her to deliver the Haskins lecture. Her capacity for perceptive observations and trenchant analysis, her ability to elucidate complex ideas, her willingness to tackle the most difficult intellectual problems, and her absolute candor are all here in abundance. Most of all, Judith Shklar's unshakable independence of mind appears in this lecture, as

it does in all that she has written. The American Council of Learned Societies was flattered that she accepted our invitation to deliver the lecture. We are even more honored to be able to publish it as one of our Occasional Papers.

A Life of Learning

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I am a bookworm. Since the age of eleven I have read and read, and enjoyed almost every moment of it. Yet I was very slow to learn how to read at all, and I hated school, avoiding it as long and as often as I could, without being an actual dropout. It was certainly not in the various schools that I attended so unwillingly that I learned to read or to write. In fact, my exasperated parents had to hire a tutor to get me started. Nor were my first encounters with literature always happy, though they certainly made a deep impression upon me. The first book I ever read through by myself was a German translation of *David Copperfield*. I read it over and over again and I still love it. The second book was a children's novel about two boys in the Thirty Years War, which led me to look it up in a wonderful illustrated world history in many volumes in my parents' library. I was hooked for life on fiction and history. It was not, however, all pleasure. One day I picked up the first volume of Shakespeare in the Schlegel-Tieck translation. The first play was *Titus Andronicus*, and I read it all. To this day I can still feel the fear and horror it inspired. I was so afraid and confused that I could not even bring myself to tell anyone what was bothering me. Finally I managed to spill it out to my oldest sister. As soon as I told her I, of course, felt infinitely relieved, especially as she assured me that these things did not really happen. The trouble was that both she and I knew that far worse was going on all around us. By 1939 I already understood that books, even scary ones, would be my best refuge from a world that was far more terrible than anything they might reveal. And that is how I became a bookworm. It was also the end of my childhood.

Biography, novels, and plays are the delight of young readers, and they certainly were mine. But I also very early on began to read about current events and political history. The reason for this precocious taste was obvious enough, just as there was nothing random about my later professional interests. Politics completely dominated our lives. My parents had had a hard time getting out of Russia, where the First World War had stranded them, after the Revolution, but they did manage to return home, to Riga, which was now a Latvian city. At first they prospered, but soon it too became a very hostile place. We were essentially German Jews, which meant that almost everyone around us wanted us to be somewhere else at best, or to kill us at worst.

My parents were well-educated, well-to-do, and liberal people, and in a wholly unobtrusive way they were completely unconventional. They had an absolute confidence in the moral and intellectual abilities of their children and treated us accordingly, which made the extreme contrast between a family with high personal standards and an utterly depraved external world inescapable. And this induced a certain wariness, if not outright cynicism, in all of us. My father had wanted to leave Europe for many years, but we had many family ties binding us to Riga, and my mother, who was a pediatrician, ran a slum clinic which she could not easily abandon. In the event, just before the Russians arrived, my uncle put us on a plane to Sweden, where we remained far too long, until well after the German invasion of Norway. By then there was only one route out of Europe, the Trans-Siberian railroad, which slowly took us to Japan. It was not an easy trip, but miraculously we escaped. In Japan we were able to buy, in effect, a visa to Canada, which had, as is now common knowledge, a less than generous immigration policy. Not long before Pearl Harbor we took a boat to Seattle where we were locked up for several surrealistic weeks in a detention jail for illegal Oriental immigrants. If I were asked what effect all these adventures had on my character, I would say that they left me with an abiding taste for black humor.

When my father was at last able to settle his financial affairs, we finally went to Montreal. It was not a city one could easily like. It was politically held together by an equilibrium of ethnic and religious resentments and distrust. And in retrospect, it is not surprising that this

political edifice eventually collapsed with extraordinary speed. The girls' school that I attended there for some three years was dreadful. In all that time I was taught as much Latin as one can pick up in less than a term at college. I also learned some geometry, and one English teacher taught us how to compose *précis*, which is a very useful skill. The rest of the teachers just stood in front of us and read the textbook out loud. What I really learned was the meaning of boredom, and I learned that so well that I have never been bored since then. I report without comment that this was thought to be an excellent school. I dare say that there were better ones around, but I remain unconvinced by those who respond with vast nostalgia to the manifest inadequacies of high-school education today.

I do not look back fondly to my college days at McGill University either. That may have something to do with the then-prevailing entrance rules: 750 points for Jews and 600 for everyone else. Nor was it an intellectually exciting institution, but at least when I arrived there, just before my 17th birthday, I was lucky to be in the same class as many ex-servicemen, whose presence made for an unusually mature and serious student body. And compared to school it was heaven. Moreover, it all worked out surprisingly well for me. I met my future husband and was married at the end of my junior year, by far the smartest thing I ever did. And I found my vocation.

Originally I had planned to major in a mixture of philosophy and economics, the rigor of which attracted me instantly. But when I was required to take a course in money and banking it became absolutely obvious to me that I was not going to be a professional economist. Philosophy was, moreover, mainly taught by a dim gentleman who took to it because he had lost his religious faith. I have known many confused people since I encountered this poor man, but nobody quite as utterly unfit to teach Plato or Descartes. Fortunately for me I was also obliged to take a course in the history of political theory taught by an American, Frederick Watkins. After two weeks of listening to this truly gifted teacher I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. If there was any way of making sense of my experiences and that of my particular world, this was it.

Watkins was a remarkable man, as the many students whom he was to

teach at Yale can testify. He was an exceptionally versatile and cultivated man and a more than talented teacher. He not only made the history of ideas fascinating in his lectures, but he also somehow conveyed the sense that nothing could be more important. I also found him very reassuring. For in many ways, direct and indirect, he let me know that the things I had been brought up to care for, classical music, pictures, literature, were indeed worthwhile, and not my personal eccentricities. His example, more than anything overtly said, gave me a great deal of self-confidence, and I would have remembered him gratefully, even if he had not encouraged me to go on to graduate school, to apply to Harvard, and then to continue to take a friendly interest in my education and career. It is a great stroke of luck to discover one's calling in one's late teens, and not everyone has the good fortune to meet the right teacher at the right time in her life, but I did, and I have continued to be thankful for the education that he offered me so many years ago.

From the day that I arrived at Harvard I loved the place, and I still do. By that I do not mean that it was perfect. Far from it. In fact, I think it is a far better university now than it was when I got there. But whatever its flaws, I found the education there I had always longed for. The Government Department was then as now very eclectic, which suited me well, and I learned a lot of political science, mostly from the junior faculty. My mentor was a famous academic figure, Carl Joachim Friedrich. And he taught me how to behave, how to be professional, how to give and prepare lectures, how to deal with colleagues and how to act in public, as well as a general idea of what I would have to know. And though he was not given to praise, he did not seem to doubt that I would manage to get ahead somehow. In fact I can recall only one nice comment he ever made to me. After my final thesis exam he said, "Well, this isn't the usual thesis, but then I did not expect it to be." Eventually I realized that he hoped that I would be his successor, as I indeed did, after many ups and downs. In retrospect it seems to me that the best thing he did for me was to let me go my own way as a student and then as a young teacher. Like many ambitious young people I was inordinately concerned about what other people thought of me, but having seen a good many graduate students since then, I realize that I was relatively self-assured, and I have Carl Friedrich to thank for it.

There are always many very bright graduate students at Harvard and I really liked many of my contemporaries there, several of whom have remained my close friends. Seminars were lively and there was a fair amount of good talk over coffee. There were also some brilliant lecturers, whom I found it thrilling to hear. And most of all I loved and still love Widener Library.

In many respects the Harvard that I entered in 1951 was a far less open scholarly society than it now is. The effects of McCarthyism were less crude and immediate than subtle and latent. The general red-bashing was, of course, a colossal waste of energy and time, but I cannot say that it deeply affected day-to-day life at the University. What it did was to enhance a whole range of attitudes that were there all along. Young scholars boasted of not being intellectuals. Among many no conversation was tolerated except sports and snobbish gossip. A kind of unappetizing dirty socks and locker room humor and false and ostentatious masculinity were vaunted. With it came an odd gentility: no one used four letter words and being appropriately dressed, in an inconspicuous Oxford gray Brooks Brothers suit, was supremely important. More damaging was that so many people who should have known better, scorned the poor, the bookish, the unconventional, the brainy, the people who did not resemble the crass and outlandish model of a real American upper-crust he-man whom they had conjured up in their imagination. For any woman of any degree of refinement or intellectuality, this was unappealing company.

To this affected boorishness was added a slavish admiration for the least intelligent, but good-looking, rich, and well connected undergraduates. Their culture was in many respects one of protected juvenile delinquency. Harvard undergraduates were easily forgiven the misery they inflicted on the rest of Cambridge. High jinx included breaking street lights and untrailing trolley cars. Conspicuous drunkenness on the streets was normal on week-ends. One of the nastiest riots I ever saw, long before the radical sit-ins, was an undergraduate rampage set off by the decision to have English rather than Latin diplomas. Several tutors were physically assaulted and injured. All this was seen as high spirits, and secretly admired. Nor were these private school products particularly well prepared. Few

could put a grammatical English sentence together, and if they knew a foreign language, they hid it well.

The real ideal of many teachers at Harvard in the 1950s was the gentleman C-er. He would, we were told, govern us and feed us, and we ought to cherish him, rather than the studious youth who would never amount to anything socially significant. There was, of course, a great deal of self-hatred in all this, which I was far too immature to understand at the time. For these demands for overt conformity were quite repressive. Harvard in the 1950s was full of people who were ashamed of their parents' social standing, as well as of their own condition. The place had too many closet Jews and closet gays and provincials who were obsessed with their inferiority to the "real thing," which was some mythical Harvard aristocracy, invented to no good purpose whatever. What was so appalling was that all of this was so unnecessary, so out of keeping with America's public philosophy. It was also a bizarre refusal to think through the real meaning of the Second World War.

In some ways I found Harvard conversations unreal. I knew what had happened in Europe between 1940 and 1945, and I assumed that most people at Harvard also were aware of the physical, political, and moral calamity that had occurred, but it was never to be discussed. Any American could have known all there was to know about the war years in Europe by then. Everything had been reported in *The New York Times* and in newsreels, but if these matters came up in class, it was only as part of the study of totalitarianism, and then it was pretty sanitized and integrated into the Cold War context. It was very isolating and had a lot to do with my later writings. Yet in an intellectually subdued way there was a shift in the local consciousness. A look at the famous "Redbook," which was the plan for the general education program at Harvard, is very revealing. Its authors were determined to immunize the young against fascism and its temptations so that "it" would never happen again. There was to be a reinforcement of *The Western Tradition*, and it was to be presented in such a way as to show up fascism as an aberration, never to be repeated. I would guess that in the pre-war Depression years some of the young men who devised this pedagogic ideology may have been tempted by attitudes that eventually coalesced into fascism, and now recoiled at

what they knew it had wrought. They wanted a different past, a “good” West, a “real” West, not the actual one that had marched into the First World War and onward. They wanted a past fit for a better denouement. I found most of this unconvincing.

Harvard in the 1950s was in appearance in a conservative moment, but it was, in fact, steadily changing, becoming perceptibly more liberal and interesting. The 1960s as a period and a phenomenon did nothing, however, to hasten this progress, quite on the contrary. I do not remember the 1960s kindly. What went on was brutish and silly and the spectacle of middle-aged men simpering about how much they learned from the young, and flattering the most uncouth of their students as models of intellectual and moral purity, would have been revolting had it not been so ridiculous. The only lasting legacy of that time is a general flight from the classroom. Many teachers simply quit and withdrew to their studies when confronted with all that abuse. Moreover a whole new generation has grown up unprepared and unwilling to teach. If you do not trust anyone over 30 in your teens, you will not like young people once you reach 40. Instead we now have a constant round of conferences and institutes which do not inspire scholarly work good enough to justify the time and effort spent on them. Still, all in all, I don't lament. As I look at my younger colleagues, I am heartened by their intelligence, competence, openness, and lack of false prejudices. And Harvards student body is certainly more alert, versatile, self-disciplined, and above all, more diverse and fun to teach, than it ever was before.

What was it like to be woman at Harvard at the time I came there? It would be naive of me to pretend that I was not asked to give this lecture because I am a woman. There is a considerable interest just now in the careers of women such as I, and it would be almost a breach of contract for me to say nothing about the subject. But before I begin that part of my story, I must say that at the time when I began my professional life, I did not think of my prospects or my circumstances primarily in terms of gender. There were many other things about me that seemed to me far more significant, and being a woman simply did not cause me much academic grief. From the first there were teachers and later publishers who went out of their way to help me, not condescendingly, but as a matter of fairness. These were

often the sons of the old suffragettes and the remnants of the Progressive Era. I liked them and admired them, though they were a pretty battered and beaten lot, on the whole, by then. Still they gave me a glimpse of American liberalism at its best. Moreover, I was not all alone. There were a few other young women in my classes, and those who persevered have all had remarkable careers.

Nevertheless, all was not well. I had hardly arrived when the wife of one of my teachers asked me bluntly why I wanted to go to graduate school, when I should be promoting my husband's career and having babies. And with one or two exceptions that was the line most of the departmental wives followed. They took the view that I should attend their sewing circle, itself a ghastly scene in which the wives of the tenured bullied the younger women, who trembled lest they jeopardize their husbands' future. I disliked these women, all of them, and simply ignored them. In retrospect I am horrified at my inability to understand their real situation. I saw only their hostility, not their self-sacrifices.

The culture created by these dependent women has largely disappeared, but some of its less agreeable habits still survive. Any hierarchical and competitive society, such as Harvard, is likely to generate a lot of gossip about who is up and who is down. It puts the lower layers in touch with those above them, and it is an avenue for malice and envy to travel up and down the scale. When I became sufficiently successful to be noticed, I inevitably became the subject of gossip, and oddly I find it extremely objectionable. I detest being verbally served for dinner by academic hostesses, so to speak, and I particularly resent it when my husband and children are made into objects of invasive curiosity and entertainment by them.

These nuisances are surely trivial, and I mention them in order not to sound too loyal to Harvard. Though perhaps I am, because my experiences have not made me very critical. Certainly in class and in examinations I was not treated differently than my male fellow-students. When it came to teaching Harvard undergraduates in sections there was a minor crisis. It was thought wonderful to have me do Radcliffe sections, but men! It had never been done! I said nothing, being far too proud to complain. After a year of dithering my elders decided that this was absurd and I began to teach at Harvard without

anyone noticing it at all.

When I graduated I was, much to my own surprise, offered an instructorship in the Government Department. When I asked, how come? I was told that I deserved it and that was that. I did not, however, know whether I wanted it. I had just had our first child and I wanted to stay with him for his first year. That proved acceptable. I rocked the cradle and wrote my first book.

To the extent that I had made any plans for my professional future at all, I saw it in high-class literary journalism. I would have liked to be a literary editor of *The Atlantic* or some such publication. This was a perfectly realistic ambition and had obvious attractions for a young woman who wanted to raise a family. I was, moreover, sure that I would go on studying and writing about political theory, which was my real calling. My husband, however, thought that I ought to give the Harvard job a chance. I could quit if I didn't like it, and I might regret not trying it out at all. So I more or less drifted into a university career, and as I went along there were always male friends telling me what to do and promoting my interests. I did not mind then and I wouldn't mind now, especially as thinking ahead is not something I do well or often.

For a number of years everything went smoothly enough. I was almost always exhausted, but like both my parents I have a lot of energy. The crunch came predictably when the matter of tenure finally came up. My department could not bring itself to say either yes or no. It had done this to several male aspirants, who hung around for years while this cat and mouse game was being played. That was more humiliation than I could bear, so I went to the dean and asked him if I could have a half-time appointment with effective tenure and lecturer's title. It was not exactly what I wanted, but it was what I decided to arrange for myself, rather than wait for others to tell me what I was worth. My colleagues accepted this deal with utter relief, and it certainly made life a lot easier for them, as well as for me. I had three children by then and a lot of writing to do. So it was by no means a disaster and it saved my self-respect, no doubt a matter of excessive importance to me. It also relieved me for years from a lot of committee and other nuisance work, though half-time never turned out to be exactly that. Do I think my

colleagues behaved well? It is, of course, unreasonable to be a judge in one's own case. So I will answer the question indirectly. There are very many scholars whom I regard as my superiors in every way and whom I admire without reserve, but I have never thought of myself, then or now, as less competent than the other members of my department.

What did this experience do for or to me? Not much. In time things straightened themselves out. Do I think that matters have improved since then? In some ways I am sure that they have. We treat our junior colleagues with far more respect and fairness now. They have more responsibility and also a more dignified and independent position. Their anxiety about tenure remains, of course, but at least we do not go out of our way to demean them any longer. The atmosphere for women is, however, far from ideal. There is certainly far less open discrimination in admissions, hiring, and promotions, and that is a very genuine improvement. However, there is a lot of cynical feminism about that is very damaging, especially to young women scholars. The chairman who calls for hiring more women, any women, for, after all, any skirt will do to make his numbers look good, and to reinforce his own liberal credentials. The self-styled male feminist who wildly overpraises every newly appointed young woman as "just brilliant and superb," when she is in fact no better or worse than her male contemporaries, is not doing her a favor, just expressing his own inability to accept the fact that a reasonably capable woman is not a miracle. The male colleague who cannot argue with a female colleague without losing his temper like an adolescent boy screaming at his mother, and the many men who cannot really carry on a serious professional conversation with a woman, are just as tiresome as those who bad-mouth us overtly. And they are more likely to be around for a long, long time proclaiming their good intentions without changing what really has to change most of all: they themselves.

For me, personally, the new era for women has not been an unmixed blessing. It is not particularly flattering to be constantly exhibited as the "first" woman to have done this or that, just like a prize pig at a country fair. The pressure, which is inevitably internalized, to do better than anyone else becomes debilitating and it erodes any self-confidence one might have built up with the years. Nothing now ever seems good

enough, however hard I try. Nevertheless, in spite of these side-effects I have much to be pleased about. Harvard has become a much less mean-spirited place than it used to be. In any case, the idea of making an ideological issue of my own career difficulties never occurred to me at all. Which is one of the reasons why I am not a real feminist. But it is not the only one. The idea of joining a movement and submitting to a collective belief system strikes me as a betrayal of intellectual values. And this conviction is an integral part of what I have tried to do as a political theorist, which is to disentangle philosophy from ideology. I am obliged to acknowledge that this is a characteristically liberal enterprise, which is a paradox, but classical liberalism can at least claim that it has tried to rise above its partisan roots, rather than to rationalize or conceal them.

As I said at the outset, I took up political theory as a way of making sense of the experiences of the 20th century. What had brought us to such a pass? In one way or another that question has lurked behind everything I have written, especially my first book, *After Utopia*, which I began when I was 22. At the time the very idea of such an undertaking was dubious. There was some doubt whether political theory itself could or should survive at all. For over a hundred and fifty years political thinking had been dominated by those great “isms,” and the outcome was plain to see. No one wanted to relive the 1930s. We had suffered enough intellectual disgrace. Ideologies were the engines of fanaticism and delusion, and we should never talk like that again. Instead we should limit ourselves to clarifying the meaning of political language, sort out intellectual muddles, and analyze the dominant concepts. In this way we could help political planners to recognize the alternatives available to them and to make reasonable choices. We would clean up the ideological mess and acquire an austere and rational style of exposition. It was not an ignoble intellectual ideal. Indeed, that passionate effort to free ourselves of affect can be recognized not only in philosophy, but in the aesthetics of that time as well. I was deeply under the spell of these intellectual aspirations, which were so obviously tied to hopes for a humane and efficient welfare state. The trouble with this way of thinking was that it did not help me much with the questions that I wanted to answer. So I turned to history.

What puzzled me when I wrote *After Utopia* was that none of the explanations for Europe's recent history made sense. And as I investigated them, it seemed clear to me that most were really up-dated versions of 19th-century ideologies, whether romantic, religious, or conservative-liberal, and not one of them was adequate to cope with the realities they tried to account for. Unhappily I was so absorbed in the history of these ideas that I never quite got to my main topic, but I did get at least one point across: that the grand ideologically based political theories were dead and that political thinking might not recover from its obvious decadence. In this I was wrong as were a great many other people. When Leo Strauss in a celebrated essay wrote that political theory was "a pitiable rump," left over by the specialized social sciences, he was being comparatively optimistic—at least he thought something remained.

What was gone was the "great tradition," that had begun with Plato and expired with Marx, Mill, or possibly Nietzsche, a canon of commanding quality, encompassing scope, and philosophical rigor. No one was writing anything comparable to *Leviathan*, and no one ever would. Only Isaiah Berlin, ever hopeful, claimed that as long as people would argue about fundamental political values political theory was alive and well. Nonsense, I said, only political chatter and the vestiges of ideology were around. No *Social Contract*, no Rousseau, no political theory! Most of us believed that in the age of the two World Wars both the utopian and the social-theoretical imagination had dried up in disenchantment and confusion. Only criticism remained as a vapid gesture of no substance, and as testimony to a general inability to understand the disasters that had overcome us, or to rise above them. What I thought was needed was a realistic adaptation to an intellectually pluralistic and skeptical eclecticism, but that could hardly get the old juices flowing.

There were other explanations for the apparent paralysis, of course. It was suggested that theory was stifled in a bureaucratic political order, where only functional thinking was encouraged, as in Byzantium, for example, where there also was no speculative thought, but just guarded little bailiwicks of ideas appropriated by an unoriginal master and his troop. I was not persuaded by this line of thought, because I knew

some Byzantine history, and could see no resemblance to us at all. More persuasive was the medieval analogy. There had been plenty of philosophical talent and imagination, but it had all been concentrated on theology and not politics. With us it was the natural sciences. A rather different claim was that it was just as well that speculative theorizing had stopped. To be sure there once had been a wonderfully rich and diverse variety of ideas and forms of public argument, but it was no longer possible to go on in that manner. We could and should work at improving the quality of intellectual history. That appealed to both certain democratic as well as aristocratic impulses, rather hard to recapture now. For the aristocratic the great canon was a cultural treasure to be preserved by and for the very few who could appreciate it. But for others, myself among them, it was the hope that by making these ideas and texts accessible to as many people as possible there would be a general deepening of the self-understanding that comes from confronting the remote and alien. The idea was to make the past relevant to all now.

What is now called “the linguistic turn” had very similar aspirations. Its hope was to be of use to all citizens by clarifying the entire vocabulary of politics and also to illuminate the alternatives available to those who had to make political choices. In addition it might also serve the social sciences by giving them a stable, unemotive, and reliable language. I was certainly inclined to believe that the prospects of the social sciences as predictive and practical knowledge were good, and that theory could do much to sustain them. Theorists would analyze the prevailing terms of political discourse and see how it functioned in different contexts. This would help the public to free itself from ideological distortions and inconsistent impulses, and would provide the social sciences with an aseptic vocabulary. I think it fair to say, that I was not atypical in caring more about being honest than about finding the truth, which only agitated traditional and radical critics at the margins of the intellectual map.

Those of you who have grown up in the midst of the vigorous debates around John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* and the literature that it has inspired, can no longer even imagine this state of mind. In retrospect it seems to me that there were stirrings of creativity under the surface all along, and that the inhibitions and hesitations of the post-ideological

age were neither futile nor mindless. They were a pause, and not a worthless one either. It got us over the disgrace of the immediate past.

To return to my younger self. The attention that *After Utopia* received had one funny result. My editors rather than I had hit upon the title, and many people thought that I had written a book about utopias. It was a fashionable topic, and I was soon asked to participate in scholarly conferences. I was in no position to refuse at that stage of my young career, and so I boned up on utopias. No subject could have been less suited to my temperament or interests, but I plowed on and even got to be quite fond of the utopian literature and eventually became a minor expert.

Utopian fantasies did not, however, liberate me from history or its burdens. I found, in spite of my dispiriting view of the discipline in general, that historical interpretation was not yet out of style, nor as irrelevant as I had originally feared. One could do more with it than just discuss who said what when. And so I soon returned to the events of the Second World War. I had been teaching a course on the history of modern legal theory for a number of years and had been reading up on the subject. Although it had nothing to do with the course itself, I thought that it might be interesting to take a good look at political trials generally and at the International Tribunals at Nuremberg and Tokyo specifically. In order to do that systematically I realized that I would have to think through for myself the very traditional problem of the relations between law, politics, and morals. As I did so, I was struck very forcefully by the difference between legal and political thinking and by the professional constrictions of jurisprudential thought, especially when it was extended beyond the limits of normal court business. Nothing could have been more remote from my mind, however, than to attack legal scholarship, lawyers, or the integrity of our legal system, but the majority of law journals were really upset at the very notion that politics structured the law very significantly. Nor were they exactly thrilled to read that one could justify the Nuremberg trials only on political grounds and the Tokyo ones not at all. I was told in no uncertain terms that only lawyers could really understand the perfection of legal reasoning. I look back with some amusement at this episode, because my skeptical inquiry into the traditional orthodoxies of legal thought was so mild and so qualified, compared to the assaults that

Critical Legal Studies have mounted against the basic assumptions of the legal establishment since then. And it is with some dismay that I now find myself treated as the purveyor of standard ideas, known to and accepted by all, even by the most conservative academic lawyers. To recognize that professions have their self-sustaining ideologies is hardly news today, but it was in 1964. And so *Legalism*, which is my favorite of the books that I have written, went quickly from being a radical outrage to being a conventional commonplace.

Going through all the published and unpublished documents relating to the War Trials in the Treasure Room of the Harvard Law Library had a very liberating effect upon me. It was as if I had done all I could do to answer the question, “how are we to think about the Nazi era?” I knew that there was much that I would never understand, but perhaps I knew enough about the essentials. At any rate, I was ready to do other things.

Since my undergraduate days I had been absolutely mesmerized by Rousseau. Watkins had given some absolutely first rate lectures and had urged me to write short and long papers about him. I was not the first reader to discover that Rousseau was addictive. It is not just that debates about him always seemed to touch upon the most vital and enduring questions of politics, but that when I read him, I knew that I was in the presence of an unequalled intelligence, so penetrating that nothing seemed to escape it. To read Rousseau is to acquire a political imagination and a second education. For someone as naturally and painlessly skeptical as I have always been, it is, moreover, a continuing revelation to follow the struggles of a mind that found skepticism both inevitable and unbearable. Above all, Rousseau has fascinated me because his writings are so perfect and lucid, and yet so totally alien to a liberal mentality. He is the complete and inevitable “other,” and yet entirely integral to the modern world that he excoriated, more so than those who have accepted it on its own terms. It is difficult to like the author of the *Confessions*, but it is a riveting work, and even if one disagrees with the *Social Contract*, who can deny the brilliance of its arguments, or not be compelled to rethink political consent? I read Rousseau as a psychologist—as he said of himself, he was “the historian of the human heart”—and a rather pessimistic thinker, which makes him unique among the defenders of democracy and equality. It

is, I believe his greatest strength. As a critical thinker he just has no rival, apart from Plato.

I am not, however, so besotted with Rousseau that I do not admire the great writers of the Enlightenment upon whom he cast his scorn. Quite on the contrary, in reaction to him, I was especially drawn to them, and am convinced that just those intellectual bonds that identify that diverse group: skepticism, autonomy and legal security for the individual, freedom and the discipline of scientific inquiry are our best hope for a less brutal and irrational world. My favorite is Montesquieu, the most authentic voice of the French Enlightenment, its bridge to America, and an acute political scientist.

Anyone who does intellectual history recognizes more or less clearly that she owes a debt to Hegel, who laid down its philosophical principles: that history, endured as the conflict between incomplete epistemologies, is resolved when we recognize this process as the totality of our collective spiritual development. The study of that experience becomes the master science. No more powerful defense of the enterprise can be imagined, and in some more modest version, intellectual historians cling to it. The grounds of Hegel's argument were to be found in his *Phenomenology*. And so I spent some five years unravelling its endless allusions and tying its political theory together. It was not altogether successful, but I would still defend my reading of Hegel as the last of the great Enlightenment thinkers. I should also, for the sake of honesty, confess that I do not understand Hegel's *Logic* and that the commentaries that I have read have not helped me. And while I am at it, I must also admit that there are a vast number of paragraphs by Heidegger that mean absolutely nothing to me. I quite simply do not understand what he is saying. I am not proud of these lapses, and I have no one to blame but myself, but it is better to own up than to hide them, especially from one's students.

Although I sometimes have students in mind when I write, I tend to keep writing and teaching apart. I have many friends who write their books as they lecture, but I somehow cannot do that, though I wish that I could. I think of the two as complementary, but different. In class I have to think of what the students must be taught, when I write I have only myself to please. I do not even find that the two compete for my

time, and rather that mysteriously and semi-consciously, they interact. I have had the good luck to have taught some absolutely wonderful young people. Some of the Harvard seniors whose undergraduate theses I have directed are the most intelligent, stimulating, and delightful people I have known, and preparing for their tutorials has certainly done a lot for my own education as well.

Graduate students are not as easy to get on with at first, because they are in such a difficult position, having just fallen from the top of their undergraduate class to the very bottom of a very greasy pole. I certainly prefer frank and independent students to ingratiating and flattering ones, and trust those who take charge of their own education most of all. Ultimately they can be the most gratifying people for a teacher. The graduate students who become professional quickly and develop a real passion for their studies may soon be one's friends, their success is in some way one's own, and they are often the best partners for discussion, whether we agree or not.

The reason why I teach political theory is not that I just like the company of young people, but that I love the subject unconditionally and am wholly convinced of its importance and want others to recognize it as such. It has therefore been quite easy for me to avoid becoming a guru or substitute parent. I really only want to be a mother to our three children, and do not like disciples. And I fear that the students who so readily attach themselves to idols lose their education along with their independence.

Much as I have enjoyed teaching, I am inclined to think that I would have written more or less the same kinds of books if I had not accepted that unexpected Harvard job. The one subject that I might not have taken up is American political theory. I originally started reading American intellectual history entirely in order to prepare an undergraduate lecture course, but it soon became an avocation and I have thought and written about it with much pleasure and interest. I do not treat it as a peculiarly local phenomenon, "a poor thing but our own," but as intrinsically significant. Apart from the early establishment of representative democracy and the persistence of slavery, which do give it a special character, American political thought is just an integral part of modern history as a whole.

The study of American history has certainly done nothing to lessen my awareness of the oppression and violence which have marked all our past and present. And it also has sharpened my skepticism as I consider the illusions, myths, and ideologies that are generated to hide and justify them. With these thoughts in mind I quite naturally turned to Montaigne's *Essays*. He increasingly has become my model as the true essayist, the master of the experimental style that weaves in and out of the subject, rather than hitting the reader over the head. As I read Montaigne I came to see that he did not preach the virtues, but reflected on our vices, mostly cruelty and betrayal. What, I asked myself, would a carefully thought through political theory that "puts cruelty first" be like? I took it as my starting point that the willful infliction of pain is an unconditional evil and tried to develop a liberal theory of politics from that ground up. That exploration led me to consider a number of other vices, especially betrayal, in their tendency to enhance cruelty. The book I built around these notions, *Ordinary Vices*, is very tentative, an exploration rather than a statement, an effort to worry rather than to soothe.

From betrayal to injustice is a short step. I am now revising a short book on injustice, and I mean to be unsettling. I want to examine the subjective claims of the aggrieved and I try to look at injustice from the vantage point of those who have experienced it, not on the model of a court of law, but in a far less rule-bound way. It is a perspective that does not make it any easier to tell misfortune from injustice, and it decidedly is not the way those who govern tend to draw the line between the two. I hope to shift the accepted paradigms a bit.

What makes a scholar choose the subjects of inquiry, and change her interests over time? Because I am too busy to be very self-reflective, I find that question hard to answer, and perhaps I had better begin by looking at others who are like me. My guess is that there is a mixture of external and internal pressures that direct scholars working within a discipline such as political theory. I think that the years of post-war passivity did not exhaust the possibilities of textual commentary, though the methods of interpretation are now all up for intense rethinking, in response to too many repetitive readings. The practical limits of "the linguistic turn" duly emerged as well, and though we will certainly have

to continue to refine and clarify our terms of discourse, few if any of us still believe that this will improve the world or even the social sciences. To be sure, muddled, emotive, and intuitive thinking would only make matters worse. So the two main post-war endeavors did not lead us to a dead-end, after all. In fact they opened the door to new prospects. Practical ethics is now deeply engaged with the political choices imposed by new technologies and administrative institutions. Analytical thought, originally so finely honed for its own sake, now has a new function here. These theoretical ventures are, I think, inspired both by events in the social world and by the fatigue induced by the remoteness of pure analysis. The stimulus of political radicalism has, in contrast, been brief and less distinguished, leaving behind it a desiccated and abstract Marxism. The career of social criticism has also floundered. As its rituals lost their charm, hermeneutics replaced prophecy, and a return to the cave in order to interpret rather than to judge politics suggested itself. Scholars now try to read their cultures as once they read their texts. I do not find these researches particularly impressive, and often they amount to little but an unspoken conservatism. What are the search for “shared meanings” and the articulation of deep intimations but celebrations of tradition? I much prefer an open and direct defense of the habitual and customary. Far more exciting, to my mind, is the enlarged scope of political theory today, as literature and the fine arts are integrated into reflections about the nature of government and its ends. It preserves the canon by expanding it.

Evidently I have some notion of how scholarly changes occur in general, but each one of us is, of course, different and has personal motives for making specific intellectual decisions. As I look at myself, I see that I have often been moved to oppose theories that did not only seem wrong to me, but also excessively fashionable. I do not simply reject, out of hand, the prevailing notions and doctrines, but complacency, metaphysical comforts, and the protection of either sheltered despair or of cozy optimism, drive me into intellectual action. I do not want to settle down into one of the available conventions. Perhaps this reflects the peculiarity of the kind of refugee I was. We had never known poverty or ignorance. My sister and I both spoke elegant English when we arrived. It made it very easy for us to adapt quickly, but we did not have to alter fundamentally to do so. And I have participated happily enough in what goes on around me, but with

no wish to be deeply involved. It is a very satisfactory situation for a scholar and a bookworm.

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