

# THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY PARK • PENNSYLVANIA

Department of Philosophy  
Sparks Building

Dear Professor Ferrater Mora:

I much appreciated your recent letter with its kind remarks. Since I have now finished your book, and have been reflecting on it for some days, and because of one or two other developments, I take the liberty of replying rather quickly and at length.

First, with respect to our project, we are coming close to the moment when Anderson will try to get funds from a Foundation. Therefore, we would be grateful if you would write a letter in support, to John M. Anderson (who will be in charge of the "management"), telling him of your interest in what we wish to do and that you think it important, etc. To refresh your memory, we will be trying to establish a philosophical register which describes in detail research and interests both in Europe and America, to facilitate a rapprochement between American and ~~European~~ continental philosophers, to organize and encourage those Americans who continue to regard philosophy as a way of life rather than as a profession, to establish a journal, etc. We plan to emphasize the political as well as the theoretical significance of such an enterprise. William Earle of Northwestern, who was our most recent visitor, is also writing such a letter, and in his opinion we ought be able to get strong support from colleagues who feel as we do. If you know of any such interested persons, especially (to enhance the prestige of our dossier) those with some reputation, perhaps you could ask them to write also to Anderson. We in turn will be pursuing our own contacts, both here and in Europe (where, for example, we hope to get letters from Jaspers and Marcel, among others).

Second, I recently received a Fulbright Research Grant to France, where I shall be affiliated with the University of Paris. I am most anxious to immerse myself in the texture of European life and would be deeply grateful to you if you care to suggest any people whom I might profitably learn from or enjoy knowing. I am aware that Europeans are considerably more reserved than Americans in making new acquaintances, and I want my stay abroad to be something other than a protracted series of lectures and exhibitions.

The central problem which your book raises for me can be stated as follows: on the one hand, your treatment of the history of western thought indicates both a personal caution (even reserve) and a deep recognition of the dislocations which are not simply peculiar to modernity, but to the condition of self-consciousness as such. Thus I should think it would be superficial to criticize you for having accepted "modernity" with optimism because I believe you see much deeper than that, and in fact are taking a deeper stand or position. What I rather wonder, in face of the aforementioned caution, is whether you are justified, in view of your own understanding, in the optimism which, as I understand it, goes beyond contemporary political events or an "acceptance of modernity," but which expresses an attitude toward man. Let me try to clarify this too cumbersome sentence. As I

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read your book, it is an assessment of intelligence or self-consciousness as made manifest in history. The problem of intelligence was recognized by Plato: the activity of thinking is already a falling-away from ideal theoria, and the angle of deviation tends to increase as society becomes more complex. This raises an insoluble problem, because the more men think, the more corrupt they become. Yet if thinking is stopped, they cease to be men, philosophy is over, and life no longer worth living. Therefore the most immediately crucial philosophical problem is a political problem. Plato's conservatism expresses, not an absolute political platform, but a recognition of the impossibility of expunging the defects of historically conditioned thought from man's existence. In the sense of Plato's conservatism, one might well under certain historical situations be a radical or revolutionary as those terms are normally defined. The meaning of his conservatism is, in the present context, pessimism. Pessimism is of course not defeatism or nihilism: it imposes upon one the task of preserving gaiety in the midst of continuous corruption. The political problem becomes two-faced, then: how to preserve the highest degree of political sanity while at the same time preserving one's own sanity (the two modes may be quite different). Of those modern thinkers whom I know, it seems to me that the complexity of this problem is most visible in Rousseau. When Rousseau goes wrong to my ear it is because his moral indignation is inimical to the character of philosophical thought: it makes him forget what he otherwise knows -- that individual health depends upon the balancing of public factors. Indignation leads to disgust, which in turn prevents him from dealing with the public in the disinterest of pessimism. Instead is generated a personal enthusiasm which colors the public and paradoxically disgust is transformed into sentiment and optimism. Thus, if you will forgive an exaggeration, one could say that Rousseau generates rather than accepts modernity in its bad aspects. This generation springs from an attitude toward intelligence or self-consciousness, rather than toward local political conditions.

I now return to your book. You seem to me to understand the issue which I attributed above to Plato. Furthermore, you are clearly not guilty of what I call Rousseau's moral indignation. I therefore do not yet understand why, given a really classical conception of the intrinsic ambiguities of consciousness, you tend toward optimism -- I repeat and emphasize, not local political optimism, but a deeper optimism concerning the ambiguities of consciousness. Finally: by Greek pessimism I do not mean the view that man will necessarily destroy himself, but rather that he could destroy himself because of an ineradicable defect of reason itself. Life goes on, as does happiness, in the shadows cast by this defect. Have I misunderstood you when I infer that, for you, the shadows are not as long nor as dark as I suspect they are?

(over)

It goes without saying that I very much enjoyed and was deeply impressed by your book. In reading over the previous lines, I fear that I have failed to state clearly what is, after all, not amenable to a Cartesian clarity, but which should be better expressed than I have managed to do. Please forgive my ineptness, and regard it as only a first approximation or basis for conversation.

I would very much like to send you some things I have written. Unfortunately, as I read over each published article, it begins to fall apart before my very gaze. What I regard as my most successful papers are not now in print. However, I shall try to pick out a few of the least imperfect offprints and send them to you, with gratitude for your interest. Please remember that they were written by a man even younger than the one who now sends you his best regards.

Cordially,

*Stanley Rosen*

10-VI-60