**Raymond Geuss, *A World Without Why***

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Raymond Geuss was until recently Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of well-regarded monographs – notably *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (1981) and *History and Illusion in Politics* (2001) – as well as several collections of philosophical essays on subjects as diverse as ethics, literature, German thought, and art. But in recent years he has become famous – or perhaps, infamous – on account of his attack upon what he sees as the dominant liberal approach to political philosophy in the Anglophone tradition.

Geuss’s recent political works, especially *Philosophy and Real Politics* (2008) and *Politics and the Imagination* (2009),centre on the important claim that politics cannot be applied ethics, and that to think otherwise is to fundamentally misunderstand what either activity consists in. But this claim, and what might follow from it, has often been overshadowed by Geuss’s tendency to abuse the views and positions of thinkers he dislikes, and styles himself in opposition to. Most notable on this front is the American liberal philosopher John Rawls, whose work Geuss makes no secret of despising. (Geuss has also notoriously described the opening sentence of Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* as like a big fish left gasping for air on the deck of a trawler.) The problem is that Geuss’s renderings of Rawls’s positions bear little accurate relation to the original. Geuss’s *modus operandi* in recent works has been to put up straw men versions of figures he dislikes, and then gleefully burn them down. Unsurprisingly, this often infuriates those sympathetic to Geuss’s targets, who (at least in private) accuse Geuss not just of bad scholarship, but of willful misrepresentation for his own personal ends.

But perhaps this is to miss the point. A more sympathetic take might be that despite an admitted lack of accuracy in rendering the positions of others, if Geuss nonetheless thereby manages to say something illuminatingly true of these thinkers, or succeeds in bringing out vital insights that would otherwise be missed, then such an approach could at least be defensible. Indeed, if Guess is simultaneously making insightful points of his own, his contribution may be an extremely valuable one. So the question is: does Raymond Geuss deserve his bad reputation?

*A World Without Why* provides a good opportunity to make an assessment. A compilation of for the most part quasi-journalistic essays, around half of which have been published before, Geuss’s chapters are purportedly organised around an indictment of the human tendency towards wishful thinking. And there can be no doubting that some of these pieces are very good indeed. ‘Goals, Origins, Disciplines’ is quietly persuasive in its suggestion that there will soon cease to be any unitary intellectual discipline of ‘philosophy’ independent of academic bureaucratic organization. ‘Authority: Some Fables’ draws upon Greek and Roman writings to show the hidden complexity of one of our most important but typically under-questioned political ideas. ‘The Wisdom of Oedipus and the Idea of a Moral Cosmos’ develops a line of criticism found in Bernard Williams’s *Shame and Necessity* regarding the superior moral insight, and basic health, of ancient Greek ethical thought compared to our own. One of the best interpreters of Nietzsche of the past three decades, Geuss’s essays are peppered throughout with insightful and accurate references to that thinker’s work. This is all to be welcomed.

Yet Geuss has two particular *bêtes noire*: liberalism, and the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The appearance of either of these – or even worse, both together – is liable to send him into intellectual apoplexy. Unfortunately, however, they tend to appear rather often. And when they do Geuss’s undoubted abilities as a philosopher promptly desert him. The ‘Preface’ to this volume includes a claim that Kant’s notion of autonomy cannot be made compatible with taking the commands of another as authoritative. At least as it is presented this claim is so unconvincing, and betrays such a basic lack of knowledge of Kant’s actual position, that one would expect better from a semi-competent undergraduate. The particularly bizarre essay ‘Politics and Architecture’ mounts the argument (if that’s not too generous a description) that because architecture can be political, but not in any way that can be assimilated to the value of justice, that therefore contemporary liberal political theory is in crucial dimensions hopelessly impoverished as an approach to politics. But this all depends on a caricature of liberal thought, and of the role of justice therein, so extreme that it is difficult to believe Geuss is being serious.

Geuss’s treatment of other thinkers appears to turn predominantly on whether he likes the sort of politics they endorsed. So Adorno gets very flattering, and as far as I can tell, fair, treatment, but Rawls and Williams, as proponents of liberalism, are not extended the same courtesy. (The exception appears to be Hegel, who drifted ever rightward in his politics, but is perhaps excused because he was a critic of Kant.) Geuss’s discussion in the essay ‘Did Williams do Ethics?’ is striking in this regard, not least because the two were actually friends prior to Williams’s death in 2003. Geuss states repeatedly that for Williams “politics should replace ethics”, a claim for which I see no warrant whatsoever, and cannot understand how anybody even remotely familiar with Williams’s work could make. (Perhaps it is because what Geuss describes is really something like his *own* position, and which he attributes to Williams only to chastise him for not following through on ‘properly’). In any case, what eventually becomes clear is that what animates Geuss in this essay has nothing to do with what Williams actually wrote about ethics, but with the fact that Williams did not engage seriously with Adorno, and turned out not to be the bearer of a radical anti-liberal politics Geuss had mistakenly assumed the two of them shared. In the end, however, Geuss realised that Williams “felt as naturally comfortable paddling about in the tepid and slimy puddle created by Locke, J.S. Mill, and Isaiah Berlin as he did in most other places”. (He goes on to further indict Williams for being “comfortable in his own skin”, whilst lauding Adorno for living a life of lavish opulence but professing to feel rather guilty about it at the same time.) With words as strong as these, we might expect to find some powerful arguments for why the liberal puddle is so slimy and tepid. If persuaded, we might forgive, or even adopt, Geuss’s impatience with Williams’s political views. Alas, it is Geuss who comes up painfully short.

At the end of the otherwise interesting and insightful discussion of wishful thinking and oracular ambiguity in the chapter ‘*Vix Intellegitur*’, Geuss suggest that given a certain form of repressive political regime, and assuming such repression extends into everyday language use, then demands for clarity “can be seen as a requirement of conformity to structures of repression”. There is nothing wrong with this line of argument as it stands: as a general claim, it is almost certainly true. And there is nothing necessarily wrong with Geuss’s applying it to our present modern liberal-democratic state form: it’s at least an open question as to whether this claim obtains here and now. But something can certainly be said *in favour* of the demand for clarity in the context of modern liberal politics. Namely, that the knife cuts both ways: it is at least possible that the use of clear language can be turned *against* repressive structures. Why cannot clarity – say, by demanding honesty, truth, and openness – work against repressive practices that depend for their continuation on these things being absent?

Even if this is the case (and it seems to me patently to *be* the case), it may remain that at some deep level we are locked into our linguistic practices in such a way that we can never truly think outside our social structures, and thus are permanently committed to, and implicated in, certain forms of repression. But it is not clear how much of a problem this is for liberal democratic societies *in particular*. I doubt that any possible human mode of social organization can avoid some level of repression, however construed, and that may well extend to control over the kinds of thoughts people can have. Yet why should liberalism be particularly vulnerable on this metric, especially when it seems to give a much *better* account of itself vis-à-vis reducing the oppression of domestic citizens than all of its recent historical and contemporary rivals? At the very least we are owed some sort of argument, one that goes beyond the truism that modes of political organization are in some dynamics repressive, and that this can extend to constraints on thought as well as action.

Geuss, however, is unlikely to be the source of any convincing story as to why liberalism is peculiarly vulnerable in the ways that would need to be shown. We can see this by turning to a different case: his discussion of Eastern Bloc communism in the second half of the twentieth century. We are assured that communist regimes were perfectly good at the economic basics, and indeed “by Western European standards” provided “more or less complete economic security”. The reason they failed “was not…because they were oppressive, and certainly not because they failed to be ‘democratic’ in the sense in which this term is used in Western liberal societies”, but because of their “inability to produce consumer goods at the level of quality and quantity that was attained by Western Europe”. This remarkable claim cuts to the heart of the paucity of Geuss’s political analysis. Nobody doubts that one important source of dissatisfaction under communism was a lack of economic luxuries combined with a knowledge that a better and less toilsome life was possible just across the border. But does Geuss really think that the dockworkers of Gdansk were dissatisfied only because of a dearth of Nike shoes and Coca Cola?

We can do better than this. One of the central weaknesses of the communist regimes was that they could not honestly justify themselves to their own populations, or by the end – as Mikhail Gorbachev illustrated – even to their ruling elites. The Eastern Bloc was a living lie: held up as a worker’s paradise and the home of the world’s only true democracies, it was abundantly clear to anybody prepared to be truthful that these were brazen falsehoods. Furthermore, these falsehoods were maintained through an extremely intrusive and expansive repressive state apparatus. (Anybody who has seen the film *The Lives of Others*, or who has followed even in minimal detail the traumas suffered by East Germans who after 1989 discovered that life-long friends had for decades been Stasi informants, will be rightly uncomfortable with Geuss’s marginalization of such factors in the failed internal legitimation of communist rule.) The Eastern Bloc regimes ultimately crumbled, at least in part, because they were a systematic fraud, and when the political will of the ruling elites to keep the fraud going failed, there was nothing else to keep them standing. And so they crumbled, spectacularly, and to the surprise of the world, for the most part peacefully.

The same is simply not the case with the liberal democratic regimes of the west. Of course nobody should deny that our societies also have their myths and lies. The so-called ‘American Dream’, which promises that everybody can make it to the top if only they work hard enough, is perhaps the most egregious example of a popularized untruth used to maintain a Western political and economic system. But the American Dream is not the central pillar of the USA’s political self-justification and *raison d’être* in anything like the way communist countries were supposed to be workers’ paradises. I strongly doubt that any society can get along wholly without myths and lies. But the point about western democratic liberal regimes is that they do not put lies at their very heart, and do not uphold those lies through dishonest political repression every single day, whilst actively suppressing the capacity for anybody to speak the truth about what is really going on. For all the failings of liberalism, it is fundamentally open to both the truth, and to the truth being spoken about it by those who wish to. For the most part, when push comes to shove, liberal democracy will often allow the truth to out, even in the face of power. The communist regimes could *never* do that, and that is one important reason why in the end they failed. Our elections are certainly flawed, but they are not despotically managed. Our economic system produces inequality, corruption, and suffering, but compared to its contemporary rivals it does a better job of making everybody better off than they otherwise would be, and we don’t pretend that we’re living in a paradise whilst starving Kulaks in the provinces. It is facts like these that must be confronted and countered if we are to be made to believe that liberalism is peculiarly evil, as Geuss needs us to believe if the rest of his claims about politics are to be worth our time.

Geuss does not turn his attention to such complex and difficult matters because he is too busy raging against a caricature of his own construction. Liberals are accused of believing “that force plays no major constitutive part in our society”, whilst the possibility that force is required to maintain our social order “does not seem even to be canvassed”. Here we are back to Geuss’s unfounded allegations. I imagine it would cut little ice with him to point out that, for example, Rawls’s political philosophy is centrally animated by *precisely* the concern that force is required to maintain a political order, and thus the central question of politics is how and why to administer such force given the fact that people inevitably disagree on what is morally right. But if Geuss isn’t prepared to listen to the facts, it’s not clear why anybody should listen to him. At any rate, the sort of substantive critical insight that would be required in order to excuse his willful disregard for what other people actually say is simply not forthcoming.

As Williams was at pains to impress, in philosophy there had better be something that counts as getting it right. Indeed, if there isn’t something that counts as getting it right, it’s likely that there won’t be anything left that deserves the name of philosophy: all we’ll have is coffee-shop conversation and various forms of rhetorical posturing. But we must go even further than this. It also matters that we are *trying* to get it right. Certainly, nobody should be blamed simply for getting it wrong. We all do that at least some of the time. But it is entirely appropriate to blame somebody for failing to even try to get it right. When his *bêtes noire* appear on the scene, it frequently looks as though Geuss isn’t even trying. But for the most part I suspect that the problem is a more subtle one: that Geuss has lost his grip on *why it matters that we should even try to get it right*. The result is ironic: Geuss ends up instantiating a form of wishful thinking with regards to what he himself believes, because of the way this is filtered through the lens of who and what he imagines he opposes. Rather than being a warning against such a human, all-too-human failing, this book is an example of it. Because Geuss is an extremely capable philosopher, he sometimes still hits the mark. And when he does so, he usually does it impressively. Yet this alone is not enough. One also has to be trying to hit the mark. After all, a stopped clock tells the correct time twice a day, but we are quite right to call it what it is: broken.