

BOURGEOIS PHILOSOPHY?

On the Problem of Leading a Free Life

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I

I would be most often characterized by my profession as “a historian of philosophy,” especially as a specialist in modern German philosophy from roughly the end of the eighteenth century to the present. There are some weighty, well-known names in this period – Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger – weighty enough and obscure enough to have inspired several hilarious Monty Python bits. But it is a designation – “historian” - that many in the profession consider the academic equivalent of “librarian” of philosophy, or someone designated to take the notes at a meeting, or at imagined past meetings, but not to participate. This is because much of contemporary philosophy aspires not to have a history or at least not to have a history relevant in any philosophical sense. The aspiration is that such a history should be as relevant as the history of chemistry is to chemistry (no chemist thinks it is important to study 18th century chemistry, and this for obvious reasons – much of it is flat out wrong). Literature and art may have living histories (no one would seriously claim that playwriting has so “progressed” since Shakespeare that Ibsen represents a better version of what Shakespeare was trying in his somewhat backward way to do), but many claim there has been real, indeed decisive progress in philosophy, just like in science,¹ such that much of the past has been left behind or if not must be creatively re-interpreted so as to be made to address contemporary issues.

I don't agree with the conventional view of what a historian of philosophy is, don't agree that we have to choose between studying old philosophy as if bad science, or that philosophy studies eternal questions faced by every generation in the same way: what is the best way to live, under what conditions may be people be coerced into doing what they don't want to, what is beauty and how important is it, and so forth. I want to talk tonight about the historical location of philosophical activity, especially recently, "among the bourgeoisie," to invoke that catch all term for modern life that characterizes the modern age by identifying those who control the social power in such a form – not aristocrats or workers, but the prosperous middle classes of Europe and North America for the most part. But I note first that my daughter was at least going in a better direction on this issue, when she was about eight and I overheard her being asked by a friend, "What does your father do for a living," and she responded, "Oh, he steals ideas from dead people." The friend naturally enough asked, "Why doesn't he think up any of his own?" and my daughter defended a version my own answer: "He says all the best ones have already been thought up, but we don't yet really understand what they mean, and have to think about them some more." Her friend did not note that this is a somewhat paradoxical response, much like the apocryphal restaurant complaint: "The food is terrible there, and they don't give you enough of it." (I should say that my son's stock response to this question is somewhat different: "He sits in front of the computer all day and orders things from Amazon.")

None of these characterizations is altogether false (although I would call the Amazon hunting pure research), but many of the German philosophers I am interested in would answer somewhat differently because they believe there is an essential relation between philosophy and its

historical time and that to understand that historical aspect of philosophy in our own time, we need to say something about how that relation manifested itself in the prior epochs out of which ours developed. The idea is that although there are any number of what seem like straightforward philosophical issues in our contemporary world, we can be led astray if we simply charge ahead and start trying to “solve” the problems, as if they were puzzles or intellectual games. Moreover, as opposed to many once standard problems that have pretty much died out – like proofs for the existence of God or the immortality of the soul, (except at good religious colleges like this one)- these current problems continue “to have a historical life,” we might say, because of complex and often hidden links with non-philosophical issues, links that become apparent only by locating the philosophy of a time in the right historical narrative, something that is not possible by attention to academic philosophical issues alone. (I mean here: philosophical issues die out; cease to have a grip on our imagination, and we do not understand that very well in philosophy. The philosophy dept zoo as example.)

I want to talk today about just one such detailed problem and its historical fate, the ideal of freedom, especially an understanding of what it is to lead one’s own life in such a way that it requires protection of basic entitlements for individuals (like property rights) and that understands human agency as resulting in actions by individuals for which they may be held individually responsible.

Even though these questions - *what is the real content of this ideal* (what would it be to lead a free life) and *why has it become so important to us, what IS its importance* - are obviously pretty vague, it already does not look like a strictly philosophical answer to those questions could get us very far, at least it doesn’t seem likely to me. It is after all only relatively recently in Western

history that we began to think of human beings as something like individuals directing and guiding the course of their own life, in some sense independent and self-determining centers of a causal agency, only relatively recently that one's entitlement to such a self-determining, self-directed life seemed not just valuable but absolutely valuable, for the most part more important even than any consideration of security, well-being and peace that would make the attainment of such an ideal more difficult, that it was even worth the risk of life in its defense. [If you are a student, you are experiencing some aspect of this: what career to choose – o the assumption it is for YOU to choose. Other example is marriage; whether to have children; how many to have.] At least, this moral, quasi-religious insistence on the value of individual liberty has attained this level of importance in the United States (as distinct from Continental Europe). Its legitimacy is not so much defended by appeals to self-interest [that we will be better off] but by appeals to a kind of absolute moral entitlement. The claim for importance actually has a lot to do with a claim by the 18th century French philosopher Rousseau that has also found generations of passionate American adherents: that there is a condition necessary for a life to have any value for me – that it be my life, that nothing can be a good for me unless it is a good to me, recognized as such by me, under conditions that allow the recognition and evaluation to be truly mine. It seems unlikely in the extreme that this notion of freedom and its most important political implication - the idea of a human or natural right - should have been waiting around in history unnoticed, waiting for Locke and Rousseau to discover it. (Seems wrong to say that Roman society, say, was simply mistaken in ignoring it. Its importance seems to grow out of our experience at a moment in historical time.

We can try to quarantine, as it were, the philosophical issues – arguing that however such an ideal got on our agenda is of no importance to philosophy, and we just investigate its rational credentials once history hands it to us. Are there good arguments to support this claim to importance or not? Period. But that seems quite narrow and ultimately unhelpful. In order to understand what the ideal is – a free life – we need to pay a lot of attention to expressions of the ideal in novels and plays and political debates and so forth – to a historical record, before we know what we are talking about.

Tocqueville as example: what Americans understood as this ideal as evidenced by their experiences and practices, not by philosophical definitions.

Moreover, if it is plausible to consider the origin and even the authority of such normative commitments as unintelligible apart from the place of such commitments in a changing, historical social organization, it is also highly plausible that any particular mode of “investigating the rational credentials” of such commitments is itself necessarily attached to the same historical story. What we count as argument forms in defense of such an ideal also come attached to complex and developing histories and need the same sort of proper location in order to be understood. For example, the idea of appealing to what form of authority “pre-social rational individuals would hypothetically choose to submit to” [expand] is not something that would have made much sense, say, to Aristotle, just as refraining from appealing to the proper natural role of men and women, to natural law, would have greatly puzzled Aquinas.

II

I have given in my title a general and polemical (and, I hope it is clear, somewhat ironic) name to these conditions, our historical condition – “bourgeois philosophy,” suggesting there is a sort of philosophy appropriate

to a historical epoch and a kind of society. [I can state what I mean by the historical task of philosophy in 3 easy steps: philosophy at its core is about normative claims; the status of claims about what we ought to believe and what ought to be done. No science, however sophisticated, can answer this question. 2. What seems acceptable as answers to such a question changes: rights of women, slavery etc. 3. It would be a mistake to conclude relativism. Each age or society or perhaps each individual has its own way of going on about these matters. When I make a claim about what ought to be believed or done, I become responsible for that claim. I commit myself to being able to defend it, not just to others whom my actions might affect, but to myself. There is no reason to think that “this is how we do things” DOES justify anything without some sort of further claim that IT ought to. This is what sets the context for wondering about how we go on about things, in our age.]

I have used the old Marxist term, bourgeois” to describe that age, and The term itself has an interesting history, and I’ll permit myself this brief digression.² Its original meaning derives from feudalism. Certainly by the eleventh century and long thereafter the term simply designated an inhabitant of the bourg, a lieu fortifié surrounding a princely household. They were the people who lived inside the fortified walls, and while they were not noble (and so did not have the privilege of carrying arms in service to the king) they were entitled to privileges as bourgeois du roi, and so, as tradesmen, artisans, and basically what we would call bureaucrats, were distinguished from the group who lived in open houses outside the walls, in the villa or country houses (a villanus or villain, a word with its own remarkable history), and certainly from the paysans, the serfs who lived farther out.

By the seventeenth century in France though much of the modern meaning of the term as an epithet, an insult, was well established. In French

literature, in Corneille, Boileau, Poisson, and most famously in Molière, a bourgeois was already a person without dignity or merit, a craven social climber, vulgar, a philistine, possessed of the means to enjoy the finer of things in life but with no clue how to do so (and terrified that such ignorance would be discovered: the man snoring through Wagner or asking how much that Vermeer would cost), and bizarrely obsessed with respectability and the appearances of conventional morality (only the appearances because the bourgeois was also false, a hypocrite, a poseur; the local anti-pornography bourgeois is the one sure to have a huge stash of the stuff in his basement). Now what is interesting about this history is that such expressions of distaste with the bourgeois and the whole way of life that emerges when they become the “ruling class” is that it is almost always tied to aristocratic nostalgia and a kind of aristocratic self-congratulation. To “épater” the bourgeoisie is to demonstrate that one is not a member, and if that cannot any longer place one in the nobility, it can help inch one closer to the hierarchy of cultural rank established by romanticism and still so influential: the ranks of the creative, authentic, artistically sensitive appreciators of the finer things. This style of critique in other words is not political (unequal wealth and unfair advantage are not usually intended in the epithet), but cultural.

It is important to note this aristocratic flavor in the use of the term as an epithet because it marks a kind of anxiety deeply connected with an important dimension of the problem of freedom. The bourgeois is held in contempt because he cannot act as the nobleman paradigmatically acts – independently, in majestic indifference to what unworthy others think of what he does. The world of the bourgeois [the world of greatly divided labor and massive specialization and so social dependencies on a scale never before imagined] – indeed for Rousseau the world of modern society itself – is a

world of such complex, pervasive and fragile dependencies that for the bourgeois attempting such independence would be economic and social suicide. His range of independent action is limited not merely by his bad, craven character, but by the form of society that requires and rewards such cautious, reputation-protecting conduct. This question of the right way to understand the relation between independence and dependence will emerge as the most significant complexity in the modern aspiration to a free life, I want to suggest later. Indeed, it will not be long before Rousseau would characterize all of modern society as such an entangling network that he would urge a commitment to an ideal of freedom that would defeat it. He tells us in his second Discourse,

The savage lives in himself: sociable man, always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others; and so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgments.

The status of this kind of scorn for the bourgeoisie and the place of this sort of anxiety in American mass culture is quite interesting. There are stock figures, bourgeois stereotypes, everywhere: Archie Bunker and Homer Simpson (both members of the modern “petit” or even working-class bourgeoisie), as well as the Cosby's, virtually any of the successful sit-com families, and, perhaps the most brilliant contemporary realization, Tony Soprano, a renegade bourgeois whose very normality makes the normal seem Mafioso. This is interesting because while we are invited to laugh and thus elevate ourselves to a nobler height, almost all of these portrayals cannot conclude an episode or film without reminding us somehow that we are no better than they or that they are as human, loving, as worthy as we are. There is an anxiety, an unease in American laughter at the bourgeoisie; our

egalitarianism, and to some extent our guilt, require such closing moments of tenderness. (Some American men are apparently even anxious enough about their own vulgarity to overcome their usual homophobia and be “made over” by a group of gay men, who descend on some poor soul and de-bourgeois-ify him, under the assumption, I suppose, that gay men and middle-class women have some sort of immune system protecting them from bourgeois bad taste.)

But my digression will turn into its own talk. We need to remember Karl Marx. Thanks to Marx, the term came to be understood in terms of control of social power; it came to designate the middle class, or the owners of the means of production, or those closer to the control of capital, or the partisans of a private property based social order and ultimately a culture reflecting such commitments. (The bourgeoisie care about nothing important enough to achieve nobility, and can produce wealth only by exploiting the majority class, the workers.) In Marx’s hands, the category came to suggest one way in which historical narrative and connections with non-philosophical factors are essential to something like philosophy, namely that the norms in question can be subject to a so-called “ideology critique,” a demonstration that an artistic style, or religious practice or philosophical thesis (about say natural right or private property) gains some sort of social authority because the idea or practice is useful in helping to convince people to continue to accept the way in which social power is organized. And of course this sort of critique is usually accompanied by an additional critique purporting to demonstrate that these class relations are inevitably doomed or inherently exploitative, or similarly unacceptable. The idea is that a particular organization of social power tends to promote a kind of resistance to evidence and argument against such an organization, so much so that it might create a so-called “false consciousness,” a way of seeing the world wherein such

possible tensions and counters are literally not even noticed, or “seen.” So when you hurl the epithet “bourgeois ideology” at someone, you mean to indict him with the charge of advancing non-philosophic and ultimately unacceptable ends with his theses and claims, as when Marx famously called religion the opium of the masses. This is what prompted the clever counter that Marxism had become the “opium of the intellectuals.”

(We might also note – one last digression – that Marx was not at all free of what could only be described as a profound aristocratic cultural contempt for the bourgeoisie. The following is from the German Ideology, where Marx is trying hard to praise the secularism and atheism of the bourgeoisie, but all sorts of other attitudes, it seems to me, leak out.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriotic, idyllic relations, It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’ It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy waters of egoistic calculation.³

This sort of claim about ideology is not heard much anymore, at least not in that form. But the term is still a strong epithet in many other ways, at least among the chattering classes. It now suggests again the variety of cultural sins noted above, with a few more added: conformism, consumerist materialism, pompous self-satisfaction, self-deceit and hypocrisy as a whole way of life.⁴ This cultural characterization - self-deceived satisfaction - is often explained as the only effective strategy for dealing with the deep, permanent conflict in bourgeois culture between the inheritance of a largely Christian

humanism on the one hand, and a ruthless, remorseless secular capitalism on the other hand; all ending up in what Nietzsche famously called a “wretched contentment.” (There are plenty of other stories about the presumed “cultural contradictions of capitalism” – like the view that liberal-democratic capitalism requires a kind of morality of prudence and responsibility which it also must undermine by promoting ever more creatively self-indulgence and hedonism, all in order to create the conditions of the expanding consumption on which capitalism depends. We could be here all night listing such theories and objections.) Let us just say that in general, the epithet is meant to convey then the charge of a self-deceived or hypocritical, disguised egoism and selfishness (often parading as entitlement claims), or a complacent satisfaction with low-minded, uninspiring, vulgar ends or goals, or, usually, both. In historical actuality, the great ideal of “a free life” is just well organized selfishness, producing a lowest-common-denominator level of cultural crudity.

At this point in the story we come to an odd twist. For by now the view that bourgeois civilization itself represents a kind of failure or is historically exhausted is much more widespread and goes much deeper than a concern with egoism or schlocky taste or even an unfair distribution of resources. And this is where, at least for me, my story gets the most interesting. For, at just the moment in the nineteenth century when Western European societies, for all of their visible flaws, seemed to start paying off the Enlightenment’s promissory notes, reducing human misery by the application of its new science and technology, increasing the authority of appeals to reason in life, reducing the divisive public role of religion, extending the revolutionary claim of individual natural right to an ever wider class of subjects, accelerating the extension of natural scientific explanation, and more and

more actually gaining what Descartes so boldly promised, the mastery of nature, it also seemed that many of the best, most creative minds produced within and as products of such societies rose up in protest, even despair at the social organization and norms that also made all of this possible. In painting, literature, and music, as well as philosophy, bourgeois modernity as a whole became not only a great problem but also a very confusing, largely distasteful fate. One can hear this most dramatically in the rapid and radical changes in music from Wagner to Schoenberg and Webern, but roughly the same modernist trajectory (the thematization of art itself as a problem, the concentration on form, the assumption of the historical exhaustion of prior forms (especially in painting and music), a liberationist sensibility demanding ever greater creative “freedom”) occurred in drama, painting, poetry and novels. This whole hour could be used up just with the recitation of a list of modernist anxieties in literature and the arts, and it would be quite a long evening indeed if we added the themes of much twentieth century European philosophy. – the end of metaphysics, the end of philosophy, the impotence of reason, failed signifiers, the death of the subject, the end of man, negative dialectics, the impossibility of poetry, the end of the novel, absolute contingency, anti-humanism, and on and on. [as soon as the ideals of such a world begin to get realized – it is counted as having reached a kind of exhaustion]

It is as if the sorts of achievements that bourgeois philosophers like Locke and Hegel, however different, had thought would count as monumental human accomplishments – the end of sectarian, religious war, the creation of some zone of privacy or domestic intimacy, health, equality under the law, rights protection, relative security and so forth – now, to many of great intelligence and imagination, were not being exactly rejected, but

were, simply, somehow not enough. What sort of a philosophical problem is that? How adequate is a philosophical response that simply says: they were wrong? It is enough; or we just need more of all that or its more extensive realization?

This dissatisfaction is so extreme that although much of European modernism was inspired by a revolutionary consciousness and a hope for a rapid acceleration of the modern trajectory, it is also not an exaggeration to say that such aspirations were increasingly over-shadowed by something darker, something like a high culture “bourgeois self-hatred.” Indeed it has been suggested⁵ that the two most successful and catastrophic mass movements of the twentieth century, fascism and communism, seem largely nourished by this well, the former rejecting the ends of peace, security and individual well-being for the sake of a return to blood and soil, collectivist, archaic primitivism, the latter for the sake of a rapid acceleration forward, beyond the basic oppositions of “individualist” bourgeois society for the sake of a classless future. This must have something to do with the appeal of such a backward-glancing, even occasionally fascist sensibility to so many modernist artists and philosophers (like Eliot, Lawrence, Pound and Heidegger) and the revolutionary leap forward attempted by so many artists and intellectuals (especially after the international collapse of the capitalist system in 1929).⁶

III

Now, right at the center of all this European pessimism is a profound suspicion in particular about the basic philosophical core of modern, “bourgeois” political philosophy, the notion central to the self-understanding and legitimation of bourgeois life – the free, self-determining responsible individual. Nowadays, one has to get in the back of a rather long queue of

complainants to register an objection about any faith in such a conception or ideal. Again though the question remains: Is any of this narrative of the historical fate of certain ideals, especially the ideal of freedom, important for philosophy? To a large extent, an answer to that question will certainly depend on what sort of story one tells and just what one claims to learn about what Hegel called the “actuality” of an idea, and just how whatever it is one learns is invoked to make a philosophical point about adequacy or legitimacy. Confronting that problem will require trying something obviously quite foolish in this context – at least a brief attempt to say something about the historical fate of such an ideal and what, if anything, such a fate distinctly reveals about the limitations and tensions inherent in the ideal itself.

In the last section of this talk, I want to try to say something in defense of such an ideal. That will take two steps. First, some discussion on the schematic dimensions of the problem: Just what is involved in what I have been calling the core bourgeois ideal, a free life? And secondly, what about this so-called historical fate, this claim about exhaustion or out-modedness?

Obviously the basic question depends on what one takes to be the conditions that have to be satisfied for a life to count as a free life, as one’s own. The simplest condition would seem to be freedom from external constraint. However one determines what is to be done, one can be said to be free only if one is not impeded or coerced in the pursuit of such ends. This can be so minimal a requirement that according to Hobbes it is the sort of freedom that can loosely be attributed to water running down hill, free if not damned or externally diverted, and as Rousseau pointed out, for human beings we should count for the most part as relevant impediments not natural barriers like gravity and walls, but being subjected to the will of others, the person who pushed us or locked us in.

However, most of us would agree that being able to do what you want is not sufficient to satisfy the criterion just described, that we also have to know something about how you ended up wanting what you want. The idea is that we have to be able to describe a certain sort of self-relation if we are to meet that requirement. For there a lot of things you might want to do and even that you regularly do, that you devoutly wish you did not want to do. The most famous example is probably Plato's in The Republic of Leontius who cannot resist looking at scores of corpses as he passes by, and so "does what he wants," but rebukes himself for having done so. ("...But at length the desire got the better of him; and forcing [his eyes] open, he ran up to the dead bodies, saying, Look, you wretches, take your fill of the fair sight.") He does not at all experience this as an episode of freedom; quite the contrary. In general, this condition seems to call for some ability to detach oneself from the pull of such incentives and then determine whether, as it is said, I can "identify" with these desires and inclinations. If I do, then I can be said to act freely in such projects; if I don't so identify, feel estranged from my own wants and desires, I could not be said to be acting freely, however unimpeded, however much the attempt can be said to be brought about by, caused by, me and no one else.

But what establishes the possibility of such real separation and on what basis could I effect such an identification, especially given the fact that I did not much determine how I got to be me, and do not much determine the context and options within which I must try to become who I think I am? It is at this point that things start breaking down in modern philosophy into interminable controversies, disputes which, I think, reflect in some way the unresolved historical attempt of the project of securing a free life for all. For what does it now mean to be able to "stand behind" or "own up to" my own

deeds and thereby identify with them, recognize myself in them? Well the role of reason has seemed important to philosophers from Socrates to Kant and John Stuart Mill, but, you can take my word for it, there is very little agreement among philosophers about how much or how little we can expect from introducing that requirement (whatever it is) into the picture. This is so because any serious real-world reflection and deliberation must always already start somewhere fairly far down the road in an evaluation and it seems a sheer fantasy to think that if we worked hard enough, we could pretend at some point not to be committed to anything normative and figure out just by thinking about it how human beings should act. Reflective evaluation always seems already to rest on the experience of something as hypocrisy, disloyalty or generosity and so forth, and none of us has ever or could ever reflectively assess all our commitments and evaluations “from the ground up.” We often like to think that we can always in principle raise questions about anything and so that we can always fulfill that condition that will establish such a rational connection between me as a subject and what I end up doing. Here I’ve only time to say that I side with those who think that this is not only a naïve view but also a dangerous one, since it promotes a kind of practice that is often quite blind to a number of limitations that ought themselves to have decisive normative force. In fact, such a danger is evidence of a deeper one, since this bourgeois notion of freedom, for a variety of reasons having to do with an interest in making claims of entitlement and just desert, tends to exaggerate the extent of individual independence and even to identify the core notion of such a value, a free life, with autonomous independence, or a sort of complete evaluative self-sufficiency. And here again we confront the issue we have seen before – if a free life is the only valuable life and a free life means an independent life, and a human life is

necessarily a dependent life, and a modern human life requires a depth and extent of dependence never before imaginable, how are we supposed to think about such independence, a “life of one’s own”?

V

I hope that a few more concluding examples can help clarify what I am trying to get at. The historical problem emerging in this literature, I am suggesting, concerns the very confusing experience of extensive social dependencies within a kind of life guided by rather extreme demands for reflective independence.

Consider how the a particular unresolved complexity manifests itself, given that all the notions we have discussed as relevant to a free life, justifiability, reason-giving and identification, all presuppose some way of having already settled in common a number of the very simplest preliminary issues – what it is that you are actually doing, something that can itself be quite contestable and that requires some way of understanding such act descriptions as involving profound social dependencies. I know it sounds vague and too literary to suggest that we find in these documents some extended attempt to “work through” in some way this unresolved legacy of the bourgeois turn in history, but perhaps some examples will help.

In one of the novels of Henry James, The Wings of the Dove, an extraordinarily intelligent woman, Kate Croy, befriends an American heiress, Milly Theale, who is dying. Kate sees that Milly has fallen in love with Merton Densher, with whom Kate herself is secretly engaged. Kate and Merton have not married and kept everything secret because for them, given their tastes and ambitions, a marriage with no money would be miserable and they have hopes a solution may come along. Kate’s solution is to have Merton make love to Milly, the rich heiress, marry her, and then after the inevitable death, Kate

and Merton can live happily ever after on Merton's inheritance. One of the great achievements of the novel is how good Kate is in convincing Merton (and us) that what they are doing is not "deceiving a dying heiress"; they are actually "allowing a friend, Milly, to experience romantic love once before she dies." I can do no justice here to just how good Kate is at this, and how different it all would seem if they had been successful and Milly had died unknowing and blissfully happy. One might want to attribute her eventual inability to somehow make this description stick to the social conventions, which in fact override her attempted re-description, or one might want to say somehow that both descriptions are true in their own way. But Kate is good enough at what she does to make it profoundly unclear just how such an issue should be settled, how our dependence on the way a putative description like this would enter and circulate in a real social world can be squared with our sense of the relative independence we want to assert about what we sincerely intended to do and what role that should play in some determination of what was done.

But James goes the other way too, does not just throw doubt on the independence of agents' descriptions in favor of the more standard or socially authoritative ones. In The Ambassadors, the conventional or socially authoritative view of the relationship between a young heir dawdling years too long in Paris and the married Parisian woman with whom he dawdles, is that it is not serious, a mere bagatelle, potentially corrupting, and that the boy should come home. The ambassador sent there to bring him home, Lambert Strether ends up disputing this description, seeing instead a world of subtlety, great sensitivity and complexity that it is good for Chad, the heir, to experience. This divergence from the norm ends up costing Strether everything he has (the boy's mother is Strether's employer and benefactor)

and James here manages to persuade us that Strether's independence is correct, although it remains mysterious how we know he is right. (This is especially so because we keep faith with Strether and his independence even after we and he learn that the conventional view had been largely right, that Chad is a thoughtless playboy and has not been helped much by his so-called education.)

Novels testify in many ways to the great limitations of any notion of freedom that exaggerates this claim of independence – an exaggerated pretence of independence that, I am suggesting, is the chief bourgeois temptation.⁷ Perhaps the most prominent and well known are the dilemmas about romantic love and marriage. Three of the greatest of the nineteenth century novels, Flaubert's Emma Bovary, Tolstoy's Anna Karinina and Fontane's Effie Briest, are about adultery and just thereby already raise a number of issues about the perceived unfreedom of the institution of marriage and so what it might mean to re-establish that connection between my sense of my own agency and my own deeds, as when Emma Bovary can say to herself in what amounts to a triumph of pathos: "I am having an affair!" (This sympathy is even true of the author (in spite of himself) who is clearly out to write an anti-adultery novel, Tolstoy).⁸

To some extent this is all a variation on a very large nineteenth century theme in the novel. Most everyone seemed to realize that while the self-understanding embodied in the ideal of modern romantic love between individuals was a very good way to get people married, to start them off at that necessary social institution, it was not at all a very good basis if you wanted people to stay married, for all the obvious reasons. But there is a deeper issue that again brings to light in such documents dimensions of the ideal of a self-determining version of freedom that are, I think,

philosophically significant. For the tension in the idea of a modern marriage has very much to do with issues we have been tracking all along. That modern romantic ideal places a great deal of value on authenticity, on the deeply and hence presumably truly felt, on the involuntary and unplanned – all as if marks of genuineness, all absorbing authenticity. A man or a woman who on a first date pulls out a questionnaire in order to investigate romantic possibilities, a person bound and determined to remain the independent subject of his or her life, is a fit subject of comedy, has misunderstood something basic in how all this works. Yet the transition from romantic intensity to bourgeois contract, the marriage contract, is what we tend to think of as the other, equally indispensable side of this once all absorbing romantic rapture. And that of course is not at all a bad thing. Given the depth and extent of human inter-dependence, such legally binding pledges of fidelity and aid are an indispensable dimension in the place of marriage and child rearing in any social order. The institution thus manifests the independent subjectivity and will of the participants as well as their acknowledgement of a vast network of social dependencies and, as in these novels, the extreme difficulty of reconciling these ideals of independence and dependence, the volitional and reflective and the all-absorbing, passionately genuine. Nothing reflects better the ambiguity and still unresolved dialectical tension in the bourgeois ideal of freedom than a promise, indeed a contract, to love.

The claim that this sort of historical and literary evidence is essential for philosophy and that this sort of appreciation of historical content is not available to one simply qua philosopher requires a much longer discussion than we can have tonight. But this sort of approach is important not just with respect to methodological issues in philosophy. The modest suggestion is that the sort of sweeping claims discussed here about the fate of the core bourgeois

ideal, the claims about dead-ends, false consciousness, historical exhaustion and so forth are quite premature. Surely we need to know first, in a great deal more detail, and in a way not traditionally thought of as purely philosophic, what a kind of life organized around such a commitment actually amounts to, what conflicts and even social pathologies it is heir to, for the real, historically situated participants in such a normative community. Secondly, I would suggest one conclusion from this brief discussion. The puzzling dialectical aspect of independence as a component of freedom, it would appear, is that it can only be achieved and sustained as a collective ideal, realized by means of a network of ever more complex inter-dependencies. Such dependencies would not then count as, would not be experienced as, unavoidable limitations on this aspiration to freedom, but as the realization of the ideal, properly understood. From this flows what was at once the most beautiful and most abused idea of late nineteenth century bourgeois thought - that no one individual can be free unless others - ultimately all others - are as well.

The complexity and dialectical oddness of such an idea means that we seem to be back at the frustrating situation described at the beginning of the talk; the best ideas having already been thought but our not seeing clearly yet what they mean. This is certainly true of the problem of the right way to understand the ideal of independent self-determination (and so extensive entitlement) at the heart of bourgeois modernity. Indeed the difficulty was clear and brilliantly put already in 1762 in Denis Diderot's Rameau's Nephew, a dialogue between an ironic, always posing, theatrical "lui" and a settled, content family man and bourgeois, "moi," At one exaggerated extreme, there is an ideal that celebrates the possibility of radical self-defining independence, a constant ironic detachment from one's role, or practice or duty even, as if an actor capable of simply putting on and off roles and functions like costumes,

not even tied to reason, unless he happens to so tie himself (for a while). That sort of ironic independence would be the epitome of freedom to such an actor, but would merely count as being lost, anomic, never truly who one is because always separated from oneself, for another type. Freedom might, by contrast be understood as having found a role or function in life that is wholly absorbing, to which one does not remain simply attached but into which one merges, free finally to be who one really is, where the idea of any separation is inconceivable, would seem a loss. This counter ideal by Moi, the faith that a modern form of domestic ordinariness can be wholly absorbing in this way, that it would be enough, is summed up at one point in a passage that will serve as my conclusion. Moi says, in response to Lui's bohemian, anti-bourgeois irony:

But I won't conceal from you that it is infinitely more pleasurable to me to have helped someone in distress, brought some difficult business to a conclusion, given some beneficial advice, read something agreeable, taken a walk with a man or woman close to my heart, passed some instructive hours with my children, written a good page, fulfilled the duties of my position, or told the woman I love something tender and soft, so that she put her arms around my neck. I know the sorts of actions I would give up all I own to have done.⁹

