A 21st Century Philosophical Toolbox

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1. Philosophy as Conceptual Space-Making

The world shapes our concepts but does not determine them; likewise our concepts shape our thought but do not determine it. The upshot is conceptual room to move. Rather than analyzing concepts as if they were fixed read-offs of reality, we can reshape and relocate them, and by so doing remake thought and the world itself.

How far we might get just by taking our own words seriously… Why do we allow "Social Security" to be reduced to a monthly check or "Homeland Security" to airport frisking? Or use the term "disposable" for oil-based throwaways that last for centuries? We might also consciously name the taken-for-granted. Suppose we adopt the term "resourcism" for the familiar view of all of nature as a mere resource for our use, thus calling it out as ideology – what shifts then?

Besides conceptual analysis… transpose and transmute concepts. Systematically transpose familiar ideas, push incremental changes toward qualitative shifts, reverse expected relationships, think opposites… (What's the opposite of terrorism? Quietly predictable social action? Why aim so low?) When the results seem dissonant, celebrate that very dissonance for its dialectical possibilities. Some philosophers "refute" environmental ethics by arguing that nature cannot "coherently" be said to have interests of its own, and therefore (e.g.) no rights -- but why wouldn't this just show that our current notions of rights are missing something?

At the very least, appeals to existing concepts and ways of talking aren't decisive. That we do not have good enough conceptual equipment to think (let alone talk) in certain ways may be part of the problem…

2. From Deconstruction to Reconstruction

Deconstruction teaches that the social, ethical, even ontological problems that we so often take as "given" are in fact products of underlying conditions, practices, and choices. But too often the genuine promise of this critical move is betrayed by the thinnest of follow-ups. We need to give the same kind of attention to the reconstruction of genuinely better alternatives in the new space of freedom that broadly deconstructive moves create.

Deconstructed cultural conditions, practices, and choices can/must be systematically re-imagined. If we owe half of the problems so treasured by bioethicists to a system dominated by doctors, lawyers, and money, it is part of ethics' job to systematically render the alternatives. If we owe the seemingly perennial temptation of psychological egoism largely to our culture's relentless atomization and juvenilization of our lives -- if the nature of our Selves is not an ontological given but at least in part

an historical condition -- then our real challenge is to begin to reconstitute more connected and mature selves and communities.

Even -- especially -- the physical world itself needs (quite literal) reconstruction. Where physical conditions also frame those supposedly given problems, they too must be brought into focus and systematically re-imagined. Every classroom literally embodies a philosophy of education: thus rebuilding or even just visibly rearranging them is a direct dialectical challenge – and can even be thematized as such in the class itself – and a reconstructive act. Or again, anthropocentrism is systematically re-inscribed by a world from which the more-than-human and even whole swaths of the human are erased or backgrounded: thus environmental philosophy's truly most critical response is not "non-anthropocentrism" but de-anthropocen*trization*: quite literally bringing back the rest of the world.

Re-imagination so practiced is arguably profoundly deconstructive itself – but it opens its critical space by silhouetting the supposedly "given" against the background of genuine alternatives: thus the whole key is different…

3. Possibilism

Possibility becomes our philosophical theme. But the practical/epistemic stance and location of the Possibilist cannot be the separation and detachment of the familiar supposedly objective observer. Philosophy is itself a mode of world-making. We need to embrace philosophy as an experimental and invitational mode of practice in that light.

Pragmatopianism -- Charlotte Perkins Gilman's term (I have read) for the project of her visionary novels: radical but experimental utopias. Philosophy as a kind of pragmatopian dare, working visibly, intrepidly, cheerfully just beyond (or maybe way beyond) the reach of "realism". Have all possible political systems (or forms of work, or marriage, or families, or) already been invented? Must the world after the "End of Oil" and the "Long Emergency" be dark, cold, and drab? Why not- instead- spectacular but in yet-to-be-imagined directions? (Like what?)

Ethics as an invitational practice. The world has immense capacities for self-augmenting change and reorganization. Some are reductions that progressively underwrite further reductions: think of animals so effectively reduced to living meat that their defenders can appeal only to nostalgia. Others bring forth unsuspected depths. Approached by an offering or invitation upfront, a creature or community may come alive. Suppose that at the forefront of animal ethics we need not better-retrofitted ethical theories but open-ended invitations to new forms of larger-than-human companionship, community and collaboration, necessarily embodied in even our most everyday acts?

In a world of hidden possibilities we cannot read any kind of final answers off the world as it is. "Realism" itself may be only a well-disguised form of self-validating reduction. Imagination and invitation must come before knowing -- or, more precisely and suggestively, imagination and invitation are necessary ways of knowing. Thus philosophy calls for ventures, and makes itself an adventure…