

Making Science Reasonable: Peter Caws on Science both Human and “Natural”

Lewis R. Gordon
Brown University

Perhaps the best statement on an intellectual’s work is the positive influence it has had on one’s own. Although I was not a formal student of Caws, I made his acquaintance indirectly through my dissertation on Sartrean bad faith.^[1] His very influential study of Sartre for the prestigious Routledge “Arguments of the Philosophers” series made its way into my work with significant impact.^[2] I recall the delight on my late mentor, Maurice Natanson’s face when he perused my bibliography and saw that I found my way to Caw’s work on my own. Natanson’s respect for Caws was such that I am sure he would have participated in the live forum and this subsequent journal discussion.

My indirect relationship with Caws changed in 1995, when I managed to secure his writing a contribution for the “Philosophy of Existence” section of *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.^[3] We finally met in 1998, when he participated in a forum at the American Philosophical Association meeting in Washington, DC. There he was—erudite, gentle, honest. I recall a member of the audience attempting to drag him into a silly quagmire of political shame since the session was sponsored by the Radical Philosophy Association. “What took you so long to be on an RPA panel?” asked the critic. Caws, ever honest and succinct, replied that he was there because I asked him to comment on the other participant’s paper, and he is committed to maximizing the quality of his intellectual work, which he hopes will be of value to human kind. These days, admitting to be primarily an intellectual is unfortunately a courageous act. Here, Caws taps into an insight of all great intellectuals: Genuine causes need people working at the best of their ability to achieve excellence in their talents. The stakes are too high for humanity to afford mediocrity.

Caws and I have had several subsequent meetings, but there is one that taps into our first meeting in an important way. Both of us spoke at the American Sociological Society’s book session on Randall Collins’s *The Sociology of Philosophy*.^[4] A mammoth volume though it may be with its encyclopedic discussion of various “networks” in Asian and European philosophies, there was much about this important work that required serious critique.^[5] For Caws, there were serious flaws in the conception of philosophy that undergirded the text. Locked in the formalism and structuralism of “networks,” the work failed to bring out the inner dynamics of philosophical argumentation—the dimension, for instance, of Descartes that we see when we step beyond the question of his canonical status in the history of philosophy: The realization of *what* he is actually saying. In effect, Caws was arguing that Collins doesn’t understand philosophy, ultimately because he wants to look at his “subject” of

inquiry purely from the outside. This is, of course, a debate about what a sociologist ultimately does.

For some, simply demonstrating “the” social mechanisms at work is sufficiently “scientific,” without regards to the inner contingencies of the individual projects and actions involved—that is, what the philosophers think they are doing. On another view, a sociology of philosophy has to present more than the networks formed by philosophers; it also has to explain the substance of the message brought by each recruit into networks beyond the functionalism of affirming the network’s *raison d’être*. Beyond both, however, is the question of the viability of philosophical theories themselves. That third option demands an understanding of what philosophers are doing by virtue of being *philosophical*.

Caws has found himself addressing matters of this sort throughout his career. Early on, in his works on science, he was critical of the misconceptions of science that abound.^[6] He has argued the same about misconceptions of philosophy. This is not to say philosophers have helped matters in this regard. Many philosophers have, after all, looked at philosophy in ways that are, at best, bland and parochial. The history of philosophy is wrought with irony in this regard. Its greatest contributors have always been, as they continue to be, rarely insiders of its prevailing schools in various epochs. The many great, “white male” philosophers who were not only peripheral in their times, but also emerged from fields other than philosophy are manifold—e.g., St. Thomas (theology), Descartes (physics and mathematics), John Locke (medicine), David Hume (law), Hegel (theology), Friedrich Nietzsche (classical philology), William James (medicine), Edmund Husserl (mathematics), Bertrand Russell (mathematics and economics), Ludwig Wittgenstein (engineering), Karl Jaspers (medicine), to name several. Caws, in similar kind, began his career in physics, and it was while on a science education fellowship at Yale that he was drawn into philosophy through his discussions with faculty in that institution’s philosophy department and his own reflections on problems of science.

In what follows, I am going to look at an insight of Caws through some metaphilosophical considerations and then some specific concerns of both natural science and the human sciences.

I

To begin, I should like to say that what I like about Caws’s work is that it carries the ironic spirit of what I call a *teleological suspension of philosophy*. The reader may wonder what such a suspension may be—is it a Kierkegaardian nostalgic calling from *Fear and Trembling*?^[7] By a teleological suspension of philosophy, I mean thinkers who are guided by a sense of there being concerns greater than philosophical ones, which, perhaps like the ultimate religious ethical dimensions of God in the Kierkegaardian formulation, where the ethical re-emerges on the level of religious faith in spite of its suspension at the level of universal morality, means that there is

something paradoxically philosophical about a teleological suspension of philosophy.^[8] In the case of philosophy, such thinkers are guided by the problems that beset them, that “call” them to philosophical reflection in the first place, and their radical commitments to such problems are such that they transcend disciplinary parochialism. Consider the following two illustrations of this point.

Karl Jaspers describes the teleological suspension of philosophy well when he writes in *Philosophy of Existence*, “Philosophy must come to grips with the claims made by *truth outside philosophy itself*. It is concerned with what it can never itself become and without which it yet would not be what it is. How it is related to religion, to the reality apprehended in religion, and to the reality of religious believers are basic questions for a living philosophy which have no final answers.”^[9]

When Calvin Schrag, my famed colleague in philosophy at Purdue University, was studying for his doctorate at Harvard, he consulted the Director of Graduate Students in the philosophy department to see if Paul Tillich, then University Professor at that August institution, could serve as his primary dissertation advisor. The DGS objected on the ground that Tillich was “a thinker, not a philosopher.”

The grandiosity of thinking has fallen sway to the mechanisms of method and professionalization. What has led to this situation is a climate of what I call *disciplinary decadence*, where one’s discipline collapses into a deontological absolute without sight of the purpose for which the discipline might have been developed.^[10] In concrete terms, we find disciplinary decadence in instances of literary theorists attacking social scientists for not being literary or textual; social scientists attacking literary theorists for not being social scientific; historians attacking philosophers for not being historical; and philosophers attacking nearly everyone else for not being philosophical—although in our age, there are many philosophers who attack other theorists for either not being scientific or hermeneutical. In the present, philosophy often stands devoid of teleological import. For some philosophers, there are only *arguments*, but the purpose of such arguments beyond their validity is open. Yet, one is left at a lost to explain why philosophy without ultimate purpose does not collapse into pseudoscience. What does one do when philosophy itself is at issue? It would seem that, in order to do philosophical work honestly, one has to suspend the *centering* of philosophy. In effect, it is the suspension of philosophy for the sake of that which, in the end, renders “philosophy” *philosophical*. A de-centered philosophy need not lack a philosophical focus.

This does not mean the philosopher must abandon arguments, explanations and hypotheses. It means, instead, the philosopher must also be an intellectual *risk*-taker. The philosopher must take leaps now and then and even question the foundations on which he or she stands.

Caws’s work exemplifies this spirit. It is not reductive; it is not marked by prejudice. Throughout his career, he never fell sway to the methodological nationalism that has

marked the various philosophical tribes. Instead, his ideas were guided by the problems, and he utilized whatever creative resources available to him.^[11] In effect, like Edmund Husserl, his primary concern was to be rigorous in his pursuit of understanding and make clear what mattered most to him.

The reference to Husserl is not accidental. As is well known, Husserl struggled with the question of how to make intellectual pursuits rigorous. In “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” he advanced some of the classic formulations of the situation of the philosopher.^[12] On the one hand, there is the danger of a reductive naturalism, which Husserl saw both in rendering natural science *the* metaphilosophy. In that turn, which he sees as the subtext of psychology as well, there is the relativism of the “facts.” In effect, the facts would subsume the source of their own evaluation, which would lock thought in a perilous relativism. To have a properly critical relationship with facts requires a conception of reason that evaluates facts. The same applies to historicism, which, he argues, is incapable of addressing the transhistorical problem of meaning. Even if a subject changes over time, its recognition as a “subject” must bridge moments in time. History, in other words, has a problem of even dealing with its own identity, which is transhistorical; to render history *historical* introduces the problem of its own evaluation. Husserl’s famous conclusion, that because reason goes beyond naturalism and historicism as well as mathematics and formal logic, which renders philosophy, in the end, an inexact activity, leaves us with much room for the imaginative side of reason. Reason is, after all, more than instrumental activity, more than figuring out how to get from one point to another. It also pertains to assessment and propriety. One can, for instance, be reasonably angry, reasonably happy, reasonably sad, etc., and one can, after all, organize one’s projects in life, as Sartre has shown, through living them pre-reflectively. There are also the well-known reflections on reason in the practical sphere from antiquity through to existentialists, where rationalistic reason often falls short.^[13]

The turn to Husserl also raises the question of a phenomenological dimension of such thinking. Phenomenology, after all, deals with nearly all the questions highlighted thus far, and it is a major approach to at least the human sciences. By *phenomenology*, I mean reflective thought upon what can be called objects of thought.^[14] An object of thought emerges as such through suspension of certain kinds of interests in the world. In the everyday world, I walk to the store with an interest in the thing I would like to purchase. I drive to work in order to complete the tasks I have for that day. And I work at all because I either like my job or, given my class status, must do so in order to survive. In that world, I meet people with expectations of conversation, to learn from them, to know what’s going on, to strike a deal, to be, perhaps, a little less lonely. This world of interests and purpose is familiar among phenomenologists as the “natural attitude.” The phenomenological moment begins when we suspend those sorts of interests. By suspension, we put to the side those types of questions. It is not that we eliminate them; we simply do not make them our focus. Thus, through such

suspension, we may wonder what it means to walk to the store, or instead of focusing on my interest in the thing to be purchased, I focus on the thing itself. I may think about what it means to drive to work. I may wonder what it means to “work.” I may ponder what it means to “meet people,” “strike deals,” or what it means to be “lonely.” As I suspend or “bracket” certain interests, I find myself approaching these objects of thought as “phenomena.” Phenomena, as most phenomenologists know, are objects of thought or, better yet, objects of consciousness. I am conscious of these phenomena, and the form of this consciousness—indeed, consciousness itself—is “directed” or “intentional”: consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. Without something of which we are conscious, we are left with, in a word, “nothing.”

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre explored this consequence of the intentionality of consciousness.^[15] He presented, first, as is well known, an “ontological” argument. If consciousness must be consciousness of something, and if consciousness by itself constitutes nothing, then the form of intentionality already points beyond itself. Indeed, even “beyond” connotes the limitations of idealism, where the world is reduced to an idea, for without transcendence, “beyond” makes no sense. An ironic consequence of this observation is that it raises a form of argument that undergirded the brand of phenomenology against which Sartre had rallied his brand of phenomenology—namely, Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. The argument that even the beyond makes no sense without the possibility of transcendence is one that goes back to Kant’s transcendental reflections on experience in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and at its core is an insight that affected Husserl’s *Ideas* and *Cartesian Meditations*—namely, at the core of such argument is that sense must make, in a word, “sense.”^[16] The appeal to meaning conditions requires more than the *validity* of such appeals but their *viability* in projects of achieving, say, “rigorous” intellectual work. The transcendental argument is premised upon the necessary and universal conditions for an idea, conditions that make the idea “objective,” so to speak. But does not such a notion of objectivity presuppose a rationality to reality that fails to account for the negative moment that stimulates such reflection?

Sartre, it is well known, proposed a radical *existential* phenomenology. The existential turn goes to the heart of intentionality as a point toward that which simultaneously embodies a standing apart. *Ex sistere*—the Latin etymology of ‘existence’ means to stand apart—and *existence*, the French cognate, is to exist and to live. To stand apart, the existential moment, challenges any *preceding* necessity, any preceding meaning. Thus, how could a transcendental presupposition be at the heart of such reflections? Sartre’s way out was simply not to address it. He *performed* transcendental phenomenological work without reflecting upon them as transcendental. The “existence” of which he speaks is presented, for instance, as an “object” of phenomenological investigation—even though as such it is understood by readers who may lack the mediation offered by analysis. Since they, too, exist, they “see” the point

as they stand apart from it in the paradoxical epistemological act of being drawn to a concept by differentiating themselves from it, the act, that is, of what Sartre calls “nihilation.”

Case in point. If consciousness by itself is nothing, what then emerges when consciousness reflects upon consciousness? The formal move Sartre made was to point out the embodied pre-reflective moment that is objectified by the reflective moment. Thus, reflective consciousness reflects upon pre-reflective consciousness as its object. In effect, we have a negation reflecting upon a negation. This negation upon a negation raises serious questions of whether it could deny itself as a negation and whether it could reduce itself to a negation. The denial and the reduction carry dangers, he argues, of “bad faith.”

Bad faith is a lie to the self. It is a lie to the self that involves an effort to hide from one’s freedom. One’s freedom is at the heart of the absence of a sedimented thing that we expect to conjoin us to the things of which we are conscious. We seek two “things”—the object of consciousness *and* consciousness. But consciousness, Sartre argues, is not a “thing,” so in such instances, there is simply one “thing”—the object of consciousness. Freed from “thingness,” we find ourselves facing a slippage of the self. Our selves are not fully contained but, instead, always “ecstatic,” always, that is, facing its possibilities and its past. Motivations abound on why such distantiation might be unbearable, and many of us seek retreat in various directions. We could retreat into a pit of thinghood, where we convince ourselves that we are literally full of ourselves. Or we could deny all; we can convince ourselves that we are so free from “thingness” that we can transcend *everything*. Such paths, as is well known among Sartre scholars, are called a retreat to facticity (thingness) and a retreat to transcendence (absolute freedom).

Sartre complicates matters by adding a requirement to consciousness. Now a “requirement” to consciousness should already render Sartre’s anti-transcendental appeals suspect. Nevertheless, his requirement is straightforward. Consciousness, he argues, must be embodied. The logic of embodied consciousness makes sense simply because without being embodied, consciousness cannot be somewhere, and without being somewhere, consciousness cannot be a point of view, and without being a point of view, there could be no position from which to be conscious *of* anything. Every “there” requires a “here.”

“Here” is where “I” am located. That “place,” if we will, is an embodied one. It is consciousness “in the flesh.” In the flesh, I am not only a point of view, but I am also a point that is viewed. I see, hear and smell, and I am seen, heard and (let us say without embarrassment) smelled. The one who sees, hears and smells me is the Other. And I do the same to him or her.

Both of us, however, can be aware of another phenomenon—the experience of being seen, heard and smelled. Implicit in that experience is the Other as a subjective point of view to whom I am presented as a self-aware object. Sartre identifies several forms of bad faith or self-lie connected to these relations. The first is sadism.

Now, sadism by itself is not a form of bad faith. One can engage in sadistic sexual play, for example, which means that one has in principle taken the position that one's role is not absolute, is not, in existential parlance, "serious." The spirit of seriousness is a bad faith attitude that involves a collapse of values into material conditions of the world. With such an attitude, values are "caused" by and are "in" the world in forms similar to the release of energy from a split atom. Put differently, the serious spirit treats values as ontological features of the world. Values lose their force as judgments and become ossified reality; they "are" the way the world "is." The bad faith sadist is therefore serious. Sadistic sexual play is not bad faith because in such an instance the erotic charge emerges for the sake of *playing*, which requires recognizing that one *chooses* the rules of the game.

Choice is an activity whose importance is so central to our subsequent discussion that I should take a moment to discuss its meaning. A condition of one's freedom is that one is able to choose. Yet, choosing and having options are not identical. Choices may work in accordance with options, but one may choose what is not a live option. The choice, then, turns back on the chooser and lives in the world of negation. There, the choice, at best, determines something about the chooser, although it fails to transform the material conditions imposed upon the chooser. Theories that fail to make the distinction between choice and option carry the danger of using the genii as the model for human choice. For the genii, and for that matter God, there is no schism between choice and option, so whatever he or she chooses *is* absolutely what *will be*.

The sadist can at best *play* God, but the sadist cannot *be* God. God, after all, at least in the Western tradition, is omnipotent and omniscient, which poses the problem of having a complete coincidence with thought and deed. That is, God seems to suffer the misfortune of having done anything by virtue of having thought it, in which case renders God's existence an awfully futile one or an extraordinarily horrible one. The sadist who is not playing situates himself on the level of God, whose futile existence already spoils the project. Such an obvious lie to the self affirms such sadism as a form of bad faith. The sadist of Sartre speaks of is one who is not playing. Such a sadist desires to be the only eyes that function as eyes, the only standpoint of sight. Such a being "becomes" the point of view from which others are seen and thus manifests a desire to see without being seen, since a consequence of being the *only* point of view is the absence of others'. To do that, the sadist must control the sight of others, force them never to function as a point of view. His credo? "I am the only point of view." Solipsism is thus another feature of serious sadism.

Then there is the serious masochist. Such a figure seeks to be through being seen. The nothingness of consciousness carries no “reality” sufficient to found being. Better, it is to be the object of consciousness. The masochist throws him or herself beneath the eyes of the sadist, and where there are no willing sadists, the masochist attempts to create one. The irony here is that in his or her desire to be pure object, to be a saturated existent, to be at the mercy of the sadist and thus “give up” agency, the masochist ends up manifesting agency. The masochist ends up attempting to “fix” the sadist’s vision and hence the sadist’s freedom. We could think of the serious sado-masochistic paradox: “Beat me! Beat me!” pleads the serious masochist, to which the serious sadist replies, with narrowed eyes and a wry grin—“No.”

The serious sadist wants to deny *others’* point of view, a task that would render others patently not-*others*. The world that he desires is a world without what phenomenologists in the Schutzean tradition call “sociality.”^[17] Sociality is the intersubjective world, the world of “others,” a world which requires the self *and* others, and the self as other to those other selves. The serious sadist’s sadism could not be acted out, could not even emerge, without others. Similarly, serious masochism is a point of view with the interest of not being a point of view. Only the masochist could pull off this lie to the masochist, which renders the masochist’s efforts performative contradictions.

What Sartre leaves out of his argument, but we shall here consider, is this. If the precondition of sadism is another subjectivity and the precondition of masochism is a subjectivity that seeks to fix other subjectivities, then intersubjectivity is the precondition of these forms of bad faith. The argument is, in other words, transcendental. Seen in this way, the orthodox interpretation of sociality as a “psychological” phenomenon fails to appreciate the importance of non-psychological foundations of the psychological appeal. In other words, it could only be purely psychological *in bad faith*. In Husserlian phenomenology, the point was put differently: Psychological explanations are *relative* to the “factual” appeals of the natural sciences, appeals that are not absolute by virtue of their failure to raise radical questions of their own assessment. A psychologistic explanation of social reality is, in other words, blatantly *not* phenomenological, and by bringing in the natural sciences as modes of legitimation, they commit another phenomenological sin: They reintroduce the causal nexus of the natural attitude, a nexus that should have been suspended at the moment of initial reflection.^[18]

That sociality could not be denied without contradiction is the message we gain from the analysis of bad faith. Sociality is so much at the heart of human relations—indeed, their “relationality” through which emerges their “historicity”—that we might as well add another definition of bad faith. Bad faith is the denial of sociality. Since bad faith is also a lie to the self, then to lie about sociality is also a self lie. What type of self

could be such that it is at one with social reality? It is none other than human reality. In denying our sociality we deny our humanity.

At this point, all would seem fine and good but for a problem raised by the phenomenological approach. If sociality is linked to our humanity, does this mean that we must always be among others in order to be human? I recall a student informing me that he preferred “cooperative” housing during his years of study. I responded that such a way of living would have driven me crazy. In order to appreciate people, I need to be away from them now and then with some regularity. For my fellow human beings to be staring me in the face without a reprieve, with “no exit,” as Sartre would say, would truly be hell.

Yet, it would be remiss for my student to have concluded I was antisocial, anticomunal or a misanthrope. Paradoxically, an antisocial human being or a misanthrope could ironically manifest his or her ire through *intense* association with others. The intensity could be such that the *sui generis* dimensions of each human being would be lost. With such a loss, one need not pay the sort of attention to others as one would when each emerges as an individual human being. Karl Jaspers, in his *Philosophy*, has pointed to this saturation as simply *Dasein*, simply being there. His preferred existence, *Existenz*, calls upon us to look at each other as irreplaceable: “Existenz however is irreducibly in another; it is the absolutely firm, the irreplaceable, and therefore, as against all mere empirical existence, consciousness as such, and spirit, it is authentic being before Transcendence to which alone it surrenders itself without reservation.”^[19] Although not premised upon Husserlian and Sartrean phenomenologies, Jaspers’s observation can be extended to affirm their insight: The irony of sociality is that although it is the world of others, it is also a world of *irreplaceable* others.^[20]

Realization of the irreplaceability of others is particularly acute in social relations that have attained the status of community. When, for instance, a member of one’s community dies, the loss is such that one no longer feels “whole,” and although others may attempt to fill the gap, such efforts are ultimately artificial. What others who come on the scene become are new irreplaceable others to be cherished on their own terms. Paradoxically, then, communities are social relations that heighten each member’s understanding of every other member’s value and uniqueness.

Irreplaceability is a condition through which there are socially-created phenomena to which I could refer in thought, memory, or imagination. The irreplaceable dimension of actors in the social world suggests a remarkable aspect of sociality and socially-created phenomena. They are not simply here or there. They are *achieved*.^[21]

That sociality is an achievement raises a problem that is peculiarly phenomenological. Recall the phenomenological approach. We suspend certain interests in order to examine their phenomenal features. Let us give this approach another name. Let us call it “ontological suspension.” Ontological suspension means that we are less

concerned with what something “is” and more concerned with its meaning. With a rock, a chair or a tree one could suspend ontological commitments and simply study its meaning. If one is uncertain, one could consult the “others” for information regarding such an object. Could one do so with a person? Another human being? If one does so, does not that leave one simply with a flat surface? Could one intend a person without, say, moral commitments? How do moral commitments differ from ontological commitments when we focus on personhood? And finally, how can the “other” appear as “other” without *being* another?

II

There is a saying as follows: Avoid making the error of looking at a pointing finger instead of what it is pointing at. In the world of scholarship, this dictum is violated regularly: There are more scholars concerned with studying Husserl, Heidegger or Sartre, for instance, than addressing the problems to which their scholarship pointed. Caws is not the latter type of professional philosopher. His books, albeit erudite and learned with regard to what other philosophers had to say, always exemplified his approach to the problems at hand. In every one of his books, he offers his own theory. The consequence is that his views on a particular subject often change over the course of the years. I will therefore consider a summary of some of his views on science and the human sciences found in his recent *Ethics from Experience*.^[22] There, he offers the following description of science:

The function of science is the explanation of nature in nature’s own terms; the method of science is imagination controlled by evidence. Science *exists*, however, as overlapping sets of universal propositions affirmed and agreed to by individual scientists, in the light of which particular propositions about matters of fact can be grouped together and explained (p. 66).

One difficulty in discussing science in English-speaking societies is that where the adjectives ‘natural’ and ‘human’ are absent, the term ‘science’ often collapses into the natural sciences. As a consequence, the expectation of *nature* as the focus of science prevails. That the method of science here is “imagination controlled by evidence” suggests, however, the object of evidentially controlled imagination need not be nature. Consequently, science, at least as exemplified by its method, could aim for other objects of investigation. Caws is in agreement with this conclusion when he observes that

If we reject the hypothesis of supernatural origins—as we must to avoid futile conflict, if we care about the accessibility of the argument to all—all authority springs from the human imagination. Science, no less than religion, began as a speculative account of some of the more noticeable regularities in human experience (p. 62).

What Caws has captured so well here is the distinction between a scientific experiment and the scientific process that led to the experiment. It is an error to think of science, for instance, as purely the empirical activity of experiment and old-style

induction, where the outcome of the experiment is knowledge of how many instances of success. The experiment is the effort to create controlled conditions through which to isolate a particular process that can be tested by way of *repeating* the experiment. The determination of *what* is being tested, however, precedes the moment of experimentation. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this point well when he observes, in his criticisms of John Stuart Mill's view of induction, the following:

Let us return to the example of Galileo and the fundamental induction which, we may say, created modern physics. How does Galileo proceed? Does he consider different examples of falling bodies and then, by a method of agreement, following the theory of John Stuart Mill, abstract what is common to these examples? As a matter of fact, he proceeds in a totally different manner. The conception of the fall of bodies which guides his experiment is not found in the facts. He forms it actively; he constructs it. He freely conceives the pure case of a freely falling body, of which there is not given example in our human experience. Then, having constructed this idea, he verifies it by showing how the confused empirical facts, which never represent the free fall in its pure state, can then be understood through the introduction of additional conditions (friction, resistance, etc. . . .), which explain the difference between the facts and the pure concept. On the basis of the free fall, therefore, one constructs the fall of a body on an inclined plane The method actually used by physicists, therefore, is not the chimerical induction of Mill, which is never practiced in the sciences. It is rather *a reading of the essence*. Through certain impure and imperfect phenomena, such as fall of a body on an inclined plane, I read off the free fall of the body, which is theoretically conceived, or forged, by the intellect. That which give its probable value to the induction and which finally shows that it is truly founded on things is not the number of facts invoked to justify it. No! It is rather the intrinsic clarity which these ideas shed on the phenomena we seek to understand.^[23]

Additional affinity between Caws and Merleau-Ponty emerges when Caws writes: "Science is a refinement of ordinary experience. The commonsense solutions that ordinary people find to the problems that arise routinely in their dealings with the physical world are not yet explicitly scientific, nor should they be held to scientific standards" (p. 28).

So, what do we make of this?

Science is about facts, which, of course, makes a philosophy of science a paradoxical affair: What kind of presumption could a philosophy make of science when we expect philosophical statements to be *true*? Would not that be, given Caws's (and Merleau-Ponty's) conception of science, the expectation of a *science* of philosophy, which Husserl has already shown to be doomed to inexactitude?

The situation is even more difficult in the human sciences. The 'science' side of the subject is factual. That there are human facts is easily defensible. For instance, there are facts about our chromosomal make-up, about our evolution, about how we

organize in groups, etc. But the ‘human’ side of the subject is wrought with activities that are not always retrospective. The human world is, after all, a world also of value, and as we saw in our discussion of the phenomenological problem of looking at things human, it means a world of value is also inaugurated from human beings that strain categories of ontological ascription onto human subjects. A distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences is needed, then, to deal with the reality of values in the study of human subjects. On this matter, Caws writes:

Science is a kind of knowledge, and as such it must always be retrospective. But values are different from knowledge. They do not come to us from the world; they go from us to the world (p. 82).

We see already a version of an insight from Sartrean existential philosophy. The distinction warns against the spirit of seriousness, where values are looked at as features of the natural world. The human side of the human sciences, then, is wrought with valuation and movements toward future-oriented activities that make “human facts” limited. The fact of the human being is paradoxically fact-transcending. In effect, then, the human *sciences*, metatheoretically understood, are sciences the extent to which hypotheses can be observed to hold—including the hypothesis of *ambiguity*. This means, then, that exactitude, a condition of one kind of science (natural and analytical [e.g., mathematics]), is not a condition of *science* itself. (It is no wonder that Caws’s career took him to an examination of Sartre’s work, where the human being is studied interpretively without a collapse into the spirit of seriousness, and its relation to structuralism, where the human world attempts to affect itself on the level of given, constituting reality).

Caws’s conception of science as imagination controlled by evidence suggests that the human sciences must, then, be in dialogue with their natural correlates—e.g., the life sciences—without collapsing into disciplinary decadence. Decadence here would be a failure to see the fact-transcending evidence that limits the scope of the life sciences as explanations of human phenomena.

III

At this point, I would like to explore an important problem in a particular area of human study—namely, political thought—in terms of Caws’s analysis.

Caws regards his work as leading to a defense of the role of the subject/ego in normative problems. He regards the hallmark of human interaction to be an attunement to responsibility: “For the individual, then, the mark of moral responsibility is a sensitivity to the probable consequences of action as they affect the freedom of others” (p. 176). The Sartrean affinities are unmistakable here, but there is more to consider. That others’ freedoms are taken so seriously, and in consequential terms, suggests an understanding of maturation. An adult takes consequences seriously because he or she is aware of the irreplaceability of other human beings and consequently the singularity of their lives and his or her own. This dynamic is often

missing in normative ethics and politics. It is as if some theorists think that people simply emerge, fully formed, and need only to reflect. The reality is we are always “working at it,” and we often do so sloppily.^[24] Under such circumstances, we try our best, but we do not always succeed. But note that trying to succeed means we must take the consequences of our actions seriously, and we must do so through realizing others are always affected by our actions. In some cases, our actions facilitate other people’s projects, whose projects in turn affect others, in ways that are enhancing or inhibiting. This being so, a problem of great import in the twentieth century finds some illumination from Caws’s reflections on what is now a triumvirate of natural science, human science and values.

Although there were many problems in normative ethics and politics that dominated the twentieth century, perhaps no two were of greater significance than those of identity and liberation.^[25] The identity question was announced by W. E. B. Du Bois, when he claimed the twentieth century would be marked by problems of the color line. The color line, as we now know, became the organizing reality and metaphor for many lines of identity formation. Thus, it became the class line, the gender line, the sexual-orientation line. Its concrete manifestations ranged from the lynching of blacks in North America to the ovens for Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, blacks, homosexuals and invalids in death camps. The liberation question was marked by the Bolshevik revolution, after which most of the century was marked by specters of revolution. Problems of identity and liberation have taken ironic turns at the end of the twentieth century. The former collapsed into “identity politics,” and the latter has become occluded by celebrations of capitalist globalization. This does not mean, however, the story has come to a close.

The identity question is not always explicit. In some of its forms it emerges as the question of definition, the question of self, and at times, the ontological question. In succinct form, it is, “Who or what am I?” The liberation question, although heavily linked to the question of revolution, is also philosophically linked to teleological questions and normative questions. In the end, they pertain to, “What ought I or we to do?” The thing is, what I do also affects, as existentialists have shown, who or what I “become”? Consequently, the identity question and the liberation question can stand in a symbiotic relation to each other: I am by virtue of what I do, and what I ought to do may reveal much about who or what I am. The political project at the heart of the divide, then, is heavily linked to the philosophical anthropological project, where paradoxically we attempt to set the conditions for an emergence of the human being premised upon what the human being ought to be. That the human being is always fact-transcending, however, makes the effort at completeness futile. The incompleteness of the human being is thus wedded to the human being as project.

Normative ethics and politics face, however, a special challenge here. For even though individuals may work to effect maximum freedom and thereby transform

themselves, the fact of the matter is that human beings act and live through a human constituted world. The consequence, then, is that they face their world as a system of rationalization. That system of rationalization, the society in which they live, is such that it could exist on a par with the spirit of seriousness. Take, for example, the kinds of debates in political thought that amount to demanding that members of a society fix themselves up. Suppose the problem in the society is that it is premised upon the inferiority of certain members. In effect, those members “fixing” themselves would require an absence of critical relation to the system. Their relation to that system would be as the human being in the face of evil under theodicy. Recall that theodicy involves the study of evil in the face of God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence. The classical move in theodicy was to point out the evil in man, not God, and thereby preserve those features of God. In modern secularization, what often emerges as sacrosanct is the political system itself, so certain individuals—as Du Bois observed—become “problems” that threaten the integrity of the system.

Du Bois argued that the theodicy of the system led to a situation where its “problems” are compelled to live a dual existence. They need to learn how the system regards itself—which is a flattering self-image—and how it really is. In effect, correlated with the asymmetrical lived realities of various groups within the society are lived, asymmetrical truth claims. The shift from values to truth takes the form of the “universality” of the system versus the “particularity” of its problems. What is ironic, however, is that its problems are part of its reality, so its relegation of them as extraneous to the system renders the system epistemically limited. The system, then, falls short of de facto universality. In effect, its problems are forced to live a false “truth” in the face of the true truth.^[26]

The twentieth century was marked by a demonstration of the limitations of many nineteenth-century claims of achieving systemic completeness. We saw this in mathematics and in epistemology, where even Wittgenstein became the best critic of his own foundational naivety.^[27] There has been, however, the same in political philosophy, but politics is such that such news is almost unbearable for patriotic adherence to the completeness of their system. The response in the United States, for instance, has been to offer the eighteenth century (classical liberalism) as the antidote to the twentieth-century’s supposed demonstrations of failure (the humanistic line from Rousseau to Hegel, Marx and their various revolutionary heirs). (Postmodernists at least do not look to the eighteenth century; for them, it is a matter of which nineteenth-century intellectual ancestor to choose, at least, one’s genealogy.) In effect, then, the tact has been to attempt retrospection instead of addressing the reality that twenty-first century problems need to be addressed on their terms. We need, in other words, a genuine twenty-first century philosophy.

A genuine twenty-first century philosophy must be attuned to the human sciences because at the heart of the question of the individual and the system is the mediating

dynamic of the human being. That being so, it means the teleological suspension of which I spoke may be a fundamental feature of twenty-first century thought. Philosophy will need not only to deal with the constituting paradox of a being that both creates and is created by its creations, but also with developing the conceptions of thought and its relevant constraints for the task of effecting such thought.

So I return to Caws's reflections on imagination and evidence. In many ways, they are correlates to liberation and identity. Our liberating goals, the *telos* of our thought, wants to fly, but they are constrained not only by what we are, but also the way things are. Maturity requires our negotiating these relationships not only epistemologically, but also, at least, ethically.^[28] Caws's work reveals the richness of these claims. He has shown they need not be antagonistic pursuits. In that regard, he has provided some groundwork for a genuine twenty-first century philosophy, and it is in such regard that I should like to close this essay with these simple words to my friend, Peter: Thank you.

Notes

[1] Lewis R. Gordon, "Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism: A Study in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre" (New Haven: Yale University Philosophy Department, 1993). The expanded and revised version was published as [Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism](#) (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1995).

[2] Peter Caws, [Sartre](#) (London: Routledge, 1979).

[3] Peter Caws and Peter Fetzner, "Philosophy of Existence and Philosophical Anthropology: Sartre and Heidegger," [The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy](#), general editor Simon Glendinning (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 152–162. This piece is section 2.4 of section 2: "Philosophy of Existence," edited and introduced by Lewis R. Gordon, pp. 101–182.

[4] Randall Collins, [The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change](#) (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of the Harvard University Press, 1998).

[5] One criticism, for instance, is the absence of Africa in the text. It's as if the work accepted G.W.F. Hegel's paradigm of the movement of history/Reason as a path from Asia to Europe, albeit with a Europeanized North America as well. For an additional approach, with a radically different foundation in a phenomenological theory of philosophies role in identity formation, see Paget Henry, [Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy](#) (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[6] See, for example, *The Philosophy of Science: A systematic Account* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1965).

[7] Søren Kierkegaard, [*"Fear and Trembling" and "Repetition,"*](#) ed. and trans. by Howard and Edna Hong, with an introduction and notes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Problema I.

[8] For discussion of the ethical-religious dimension of a teleological suspension of the ethical, see Calvin O. Schrag, "Note on Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," in Schrag's [*Philosophical papers: Betwixt and Between*](#) (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 27–32. For more discussion on a teleological suspension of philosophy, see Lewis R. Gordon, "Introduction: The Call in Africana Religion and Philosophy," *Listening: A Journal of Religion and Culture* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 3–13. Special issue: "Africana Religion and Cultures: Perspectives on the Call."

[9] Karl Jaspers, [*Philosophy of Existence*](#), trans. with an introduction by Richard F. Grabay (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 90.

[10] See [*Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*](#), chapter 3. See also Friedrich Nietzsche's portrayal of decadence in [*The Will to Power*](#), trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale, and ed. with Commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968).

[11] See, for example, his interview in [*Parliament of Minds*](#), ed. by Patrick Fitzgerald (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999). This interview was also broadcasted under the series with the same name on PBS affiliates that year.

[12] Edmund Husserl, [*Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*](#), trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), first essay.

[13] For discussion, see, e.g., William Barrett, [*The Illusion of Technique: Searching for Meaning in a Technological Civilization*](#) (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1979).

[14] The discussion of phenomenology that follows emerges from a lecture I presented at Duquesne University, "A Phenomenology of Visible Invisibility: Racial Portraits of Anonymity," published in their working-paper series *Confluences: Phenomenology and Postmodernity, Environment, Race, Gender*, ed. by Daniel J. Martino (Pittsburgh: The Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center, Duquesne University, 2000), pp. 39–52. A version of it emerges as a section in chapter 4 of my book [*Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*](#) (New York: Routledge, 2000) and in a forthcoming volume edited by Robert Birt entitled [*Of the Quest for Community and Identity: An Africana Philosophical Anthology*](#) (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield).

[15] Jean-Paul Sartre, [*Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*](#), trans. with an intro. By Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956).

[16] Immanuel Kant, [Critique of Pure Reason \(Unabridged Edition\)](#), trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965) and Edmund Husserl, [Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology](#), trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960).

[17] See Alfred Schutz, [Collected Papers, vol. 1, the Problem of Social Reality](#), ed. with an intro. by Maurice Natanson and a preface by H. L. Van Breda (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962) and, of course, his seminal study *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert, with an intro. by George Walsh (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). See also Maurice Natanson, [Anonymity: A Study in the Philosophy of Alfred Schutz](#) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[18] Husserl made this argument on many occasions, but see especially "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," reprinted in his [Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy](#), trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

[19] Karl Jaspers, [Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures](#), trans. with an introduction by William Earle (New York: Noonday, 1955), p. 62.

[20] See also Karl Jaspers's *Philosophy*, 3 volumes, trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969–1971).

[21] The achievement of sociality is a Schutzian theme with many implications. See, e.g., my discussion of achieving sociality in Lewis R. Gordon, [Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences](#) (New York: Routledge, 1995), chapter 3.

[22] Peter Caws, [Ethics from Experience](#) (Boston: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1996). Some earlier efforts include *The Philosophy of Science* and *Science and the Theory of Value* (New York: Random House, 1967). See also his recent [Yorick's World: Science and the Knowing Subject](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[23] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ["The Primacy of Perception" and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the philosophy of Art, History and Politics](#), ed. with an intro. by James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 69.

[24] For recent discussion in this regard, see Lewis R. Gordon, "Moral Obligations Across Generations; A Consideration in the Understanding of Community Formation," in *Understanding Communities*, ed. by Phillip Alperson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, forthcoming).

[25] What follows here is an outline of arguments elaborated in Lewis R. Gordon, "Identity and Liberation: A Phenomenological Approach," in [Phenomenology of the Political](#), ed. by Kevin Thompson and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), pp. 189–205 and Lewis R. Gordon, [Existential Africa](#):

[Understanding Africana Existential Thought](#) (New York: Routledge, 2000), chapter 4: “What Does It Mean To Be a Problem?”

[26] For detailed discussion of Du Bois’s creative response to these problems, see my essay, “What Does It Mean To Be a Problem?” in [Existencia Africana](#), and to read more on these dynamics of “untruthful truths” and, say, “unjust justice,” see Lewis R. Gordon, [Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial World](#) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), Parts I and II.

[27] I am speaking, of course, of the distinction between Wittgenstein’s [Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus](#) and his [Philosophical Investigations](#).

[28] There are, of course, matters of aesthetic and religious considerations. Jaspers identifies these dynamics well in [Philosophy of Existence](#), but I encourage the reader to consider, as well, Keiji Nishitani’s [Religion and Nothingness](#), trans. by Jan Van Bragt, with a foreword by Winston L. King (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), where the author argues that philosophy’s inability to bring meaning to life limits its scope in relation to religion. In short, religion will go where philosophy dares not, and in fact *cannot*, go.