1 INTENTION AND MEANING

. . . in which the metaphysical assumptions of radical practice are discussed: Is the world finite or is it infinite, closed in upon itself or open to the future? Are values inherent in the nature of things or inscribed by us upon the world? The project is to establish a rational and moral foundation for radical practice.

Idea and Practice of the Good Society

The Good Society is a challenge to our moral imagination. How should we live collectively with one another? That is the central question of this book. An answer may be approached in two ways. One is by describing an ideal society in which the attempt is made to combine harmoniously all the qualities we believe to be necessary for the good life. This path, which leads to a history-less utopia, is rejected. The other is by describing a possible mode of being in the world that, in trying to give itself space and to create the conditions that are likely to sustain it, must continuously struggle against the encompassing forces of large-scale organization and coercive power. This struggle (and the moral principles that underlie it) is identified with the social practice of the Good Society. It is a radical form of practice for which we are alone responsible.

As an idea the Good Society has always been a central occupation of philosophers. But this book is not about the Good Society as an idea; it is about its practice. It is about the moral values that ought to underlie the social practice of the Good Society.

Moral values: statements of how we ought to live in common with each other.

Society may be viewed as the totality of social relations that exists within a given territory at a specific time. These relationships are palpable and real, but we are able to describe them only from a vantage point of how they ought to be. A social order cannot be described without some concept of the Good Society.

By the same logic social practice is not possible without a sense of how we ought to act. Knowing how we ought to act, we can acquire the ability to know the world. Having

acquired the ability to know the world, we can endeavor to transform it.

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The Good Society is a rational construct: we are able to grasp its meaning with the instruments of ordinary reason. But thinking about the Good Society is not linear: it is a dialectical process that leads us into unknown regions of the mind.

Your reading of this book will set you off on journeys of your own, and what you will discover there—a rock, a twig, a vision—you will eventually bring back to a reading of these lines. Your Good Society will not be mine. It is only in its practice that we may join and merge the separate realities by which we live into a shared experience.

Practice is sensuous activity. Transcending mere thought, it mingles with the world and so creates the possibility of changing those upon whose lives we touch. Thinking by itself makes nothing happen; only practice can bring the world we want into a living presence.

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There are no moral guarantors of social practice. Individually and collectively, we are responsible for what we do.

The World of *n* and *n* + 1

Struggle defines the social practice of the Good Society, but every struggle implies a moral choice: to set purposes into the world and to achieve them. What if we were merely the unwitting instruments of history, while history itself moved in obedience to a secret plan? Then choice would be futile, the struggle would be to no avail.

If, on the other hand, the world is open to the future and thus without a plan or purpose of its own, the social practice of the Good Society becomes a way of creating possible meanings scaled to a human understanding. Suspended between a past from which we try to wrest some sense for living and a future that will frustrate even our noblest intentions, we are sustained by hope. Where hope

fails, absurdity takes over. Affirming life, and in revolt against absurdity, we come upon the Good Society. Struggling to come into being, the Good Society is built upon the hope that chaos can be held at bay.

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Is the human world finite in its possibilities, or is it infinite? However we decide, our answer will define a basic disposition toward the social practice of the Good Society. The question is directed at the metaphysical basis of human existence; no amount of empirical data is able to illuminate the question further or to support the answers we may choose to give. Yet choice is inescapable. We cannot choose not to choose, remaining suspended between a view of human history as either closed upon itself or open to the future and so essentially as indeterminate.

The world is finite. This implies: all that shall ever be is encapsulated within the present moment and has been so since time's beginning. But also: all that has ever been is there because of the end it foreshadows. Nothing is added, and nothing has been taken away. The human world is moving ineluctably from initial cause to final omega according to a comprehensive plan or purpose that is revealed to us in the course of its unfolding.

History obeys an inner logic of its own; its meaning is immanent in every human act. Truth is one and therefore capable of being known as a totality. Nothing that has ever happened or will happen is extraneous to the grand scheme of historical becoming which points toward a single end: the world is taking form. In mathematical notation the human world consists potentially of n phenomena, where n is any finite number of events.

The world is infinite. This implies: history is the biography of humankind. There is no inner necessity, no logic, no plan. The world is not evolving toward any final form or *telos.* Events have neither coherence nor an intrinsic meaning that points beyond themselves toward an encompassing, intelligible whole. Time is simply the duration

and succession of events, a drift of happening. In mathematical language the human world consists of $n + 1$ phenomena: whatever has occurred, there is always one more thing to come, another step that may be taken into infinity. The path toward the future lies open.

In a world of solid structures and objective meanings, in a world of finite possibilities, the "hope that passeth understanding" is hope in the ultimate benevolence of the plan; in a world of infinite possibilities, it is in humankind's ability to make a home fit for itself.

Such meanings as we claim to find, we have, in fact, imposed upon the world. First are the prospective meanings of purposeful action. But every action calls forth an infinite series of action and reaction until the original intention is lost, beyond all recollection, in the mirrors of the mind. Second are the retrospective meanings we inscribe upon events by a careful reading of the signs and symbols that we left behind as traces of the path by which we came.

Both kinds of meaning are themselves intentional acts and so the fuel of living history until they, too, burn out and are replaced each moment by new meanings and new myths.

Our artificers of knowledge are indeed makers of myths. Stripped of its myths, the world, exposed in its complete absurdity, would be unbearable.

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The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena. (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* 1921)

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Open to the world, yet inescapably a part of it, we are impelled by a protean need for order. The sense of cosmic

terror must be struck from our minds. We tame the past by interpreting the tarot cards in our deck but seek to gain the future by acts of sheer intentionality in social practice. Beyond the equal possibilities of single truth and boundless chaos, we seek to mold and form the future history of humankind.

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I hope, therefore I am.

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León firemen said a number of people were killed early Thursday in a clash near the town's central square, and the bodies of guardsmen and civilians lay in the street. However, the fighting was so intense that neither the Fire Department trucks nor Red Cross ambulances could recover the bodies or bring out the wounded. (*Los Angeles Times,* September 15, 1978)

A child is dying in the afternoon.
The square is empty.
The child is a wounded rose.
The square is empty.
In the center of the square
there is a monstrous garden.
The afternoon grows like a vast
sickness, slowly a giant insect
climbs over its feverish body.
The square is empty.
A bird hangs in the air.
Languid with heat
voluptuous flies are buried
in the sweet secretions
of the afternoon.
The square is empty.
The sky hangs like a noose
around the square.
In the center of the square
a child is dying.

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Because we are unable to bear the world's absurdity, we revolt. Our revolt turns into a struggle for the Good Society. To ward off chaos, this struggle must continue without letup. It turns into a permanent struggle.

Axial Dimensions of Value

The struggle for the Good Society is essentially a struggle for meaning. By meaning we intend a standing in significant relation to self and to others, and to the environment in which we move, both physically and in spirit.

Meaning does not inhere in the world but arises from the way we choose to see certain crucial relationships. It expresses certain *valued* dimensions, including the functional, aesthetic, moral, and religious.

Positivism maintains that a discussion of values, other than functional relations, cannot in the nature of the case be rational. This contention is wrong. Though they may not be objectively present, aesthetic, moral, and religious values may be *objectified* in public discourse; they may become examined values. Vouchsafed by a relevant critical tradition, their general validity may be established.

This argument is intended to take the present discourse about the Good Society from the realm of mystical speculation and place it within the Judaeo-Christian tradition of rational thinking about moral questions.

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In its most elementary sense meaning refers to patterns of significant relation. We perceive relations as significant when they reveal to us one or more of the basic dimensions of value: the functional, the aesthetic, the moral, the religious. We say then that we evaluate relations, that we extract from them the specific terms of value to which they seem to point. The fundamental need that compels us to inform the chaos into which we have been thrust with

meaning is thus for standing in significant relation to our own existence as social beings.

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I want to live correctly. To live correctly cannot be wrong. There must be a correct way to live. That way must conform to the nature of life, and to what is the case. (R. D. Laing, *The Facts of Life,* 1977)

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The interpreted world extends along four axial dimensions of value. In the first dimension we perceive relations of means to ends or purely *functional* relations. In many cases, because there tends to be widespread agreement on whether something works or not, functional relations can be objectively determined; the technical coefficients for each sustaining part or process can be calculated. Efficiency is the appropriate measure of performance.

Specific sets of means-ends relationships give rise to functional wholes that may themselves be interwoven with other wholes, from food chains to machines, production processes, and global trade. The agreement on criteria of measurement which renders functional relationships objective tends to break down when the relationships are very complex, as they are in large-scale social systems for whose performance we lack appropriate and universal standards. The objectivity of functional relationships tends to be confined to the narrower scope of technical relations that form the subject matter of the natural sciences and engineering.

Variations in *aesthetic, moral,* and *religious* relationships that form the remaining dimensions of value cannot be so easily described in quantitative terms without substantial loss of meaning. While the relationship of means to ends can often be empirically established, valuations in these dimensions are validated only in the context of a specific tradition of critical thought.

Aesthetic values are sensual relations that are pleasing to the eye or ear. Because we are able to compare particular forms of aesthetic expression only in terms of categories that partake of a given tradition, they are more than merely statements of personal preference. A Chinese landscape scroll from the Sung dynasty may be acclaimed by experts as a superior example of its kind, but it is not directly comparable, in aesthetic terms, to a landscape by Cézanne. Differences in aesthetic value can only be discussed within a single tradition of perception and critical scholarship.

Moral values are concerned with the quality of human relations. In specific social settings propriety and fitness are categories that may be used to describe the quality of moral relations. But categories such as these are only comprehensible within a cultural domain where common usage and philosophical analysis have established the relevant bases for comparison. There is no universal moral standard.

The same is true for *religious* values that concern our relations with that realm of pure being that, nameless and inexpressible, lies beyond the reach of human reason. The varied forms of what is sacred can only be distinguished within particular historical traditions of religious practice and theology; except in a purely formal sense they cannot be compared across the boundaries of these traditions.

A critical tradition constitutes a universe of public discourse. And this implies: values can be named, compared, critically assessed, and brought into significant relation with each other in comprehensive structures of meaning. Values can become the subject of rational analysis; *they are communicable.*

So long as values remain purely personal apprehensions of meaning, they are excluded from the crucible of public

discussion in which they are refined and spun into that web of meanings with which we cover our nakedness against the icy winds of nothingness. Personal meanings need to be confirmed by others, so that we may gain some confidence in them. Otherwise, how shall I know that I am not a butterfly?

It is therefore possible to say that values have a rational basis; they are *examined* values. It is not enough to assert my values against the void, but I must raise them to that level of formal abstraction where reasoned discourse about them becomes possible. By so exposing my conception to another's scrutiny, I admit my need for the validation of my values in a social context. I submit them to the ultimate test within the critical tradition that I choose.

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So that my values may also be examined values, I must insist on total and unlimited communication about them.

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Once upon a time, Chuang Chou dreamed that he was a butterfly, a butterfly fluttering about, enjoying itself. It did not know that it was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he awoke with a start and he was Chuang Chou again. But he did not know whether he was Chuang Chou who had dreamed that he was a butterfly, or whether he was a butterfly dreaming that he was Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is what is called the transformation of things. (Chuang Tzu, 4th-3rd centuries B.C.)

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Early in the history of humankind, religious values may have been all-pervasive, and everything was either seen or intended as the "will of Heaven" whose inscrutable meanings and capricious demands were interpreted (and

mediated) by priests. But with the secularization of the world, the several dimensions of value began to diverge, giving rise to the possibility of contradictions among them.

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In a world of infinite possibilities, values are neither absolutely right nor wrong. Their validation is contingent on the universe of public discourse within which they arise.

Because they strike me as potentially significant, I seize upon certain relations in the world. I interpret these relations, using categories made available to me by the tradition to which I choose to defer. In this way, I give meaning to my world. Where the relationships are functional, I may verify their meanings by a series of objective tests. But where they are aesthetic, moral, or religious, I must submit my understanding to a more fluid process of social validation. Outside of a particular tradition of critical thought, the validation of my meanings is withheld, and it may even be denied.

In a world of finite possibilities, all meanings are contained within it from the start. Such meanings are both tangible and real relations. They transcend all critical traditions and are ready to be discovered by anyone instructed to receive their message. Significant statements about relations in a finite world will therefore always be either correct or not. This belief in the inherent righteousness of human cause has often led us into violent crusades against those whom we have held to be in error. For the meanings of a finite world insist on their dominion over anyone who would dispute their truth.

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The four dimensions of value overlap and interpenetrate each other. We perceive most things, events, and modes of behavior as having a functional value. But superpositions in the remaining realms of value are also frequent

and revealing. Plato ascribed moral significance to poetry and music, and a Taoist painting gives a powerful aesthetic expression to a mystical sense of oneness with nature. Moreover, certain value categories, such as harmony, may apply across several dimensions, as when we say that a sculptured composition is harmonious in the arrangement of its parts, a family lives in accord and harmony with its neighbors, or a saintly person has achieved a sense of peaceful harmony with the Divine.

These statements correspond to a deep-seated urge to see the world as a totality, interpret its glittering diversity as nothing but the expression of a single principle of universal order: Nature, the Tao, the Will of Heaven or, more kinetically, the dialectic principle, yin and yang, the struggle between good and evil, or the principle of evolution. In this view, then, all genuine values are regarded as coterminous.

But the metaphysical unity of the world is only one of many constructs that are possible, and the axial dimensions of value not only do not have to coincide, they may conflict with one another. What is functional may not be life-sustaining, and whatever sustains life need not be functional. Aesthetic and religious traditions clash in the idolatry of images. The "terrible beauty of violence" suggests a conflict between moral and aesthetic values. And the so-called divine sanction of social inequality points to a divergence between certain religious and moral conceptions of the world.

Within a given tradition of critical thought, values stand for principles of order that we inscribe upon the world.

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There is no a priori *order of things.* (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* 1921)

The Living Presence of the Good Society

The Good Society is conceived dialectically as standing in opposition to the world of social planning and the state with its imposing hierarchies of power. Its object is to resist the "natural tendency" of power to become total; its method and constraint is dialogue; its self-realization takes place entirely within the public realm. The Good Society is thus an immanent possibility. Through radical practice it seeks to bring about those changes in the structures of social planning—the exercise of power by the state and by the large-scale organizations associated with it—that will release us from their bondage.

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Radical social practice emerges as the central organizing concept of this work. It stands for moral action in the public realm, that arena for the formulation and enactment of shared purposes that transcend and point beyond a purely personal and private interest.

Moral action introduces a concern for the quality of social relations and their fitness and propriety for what it means to be a human being. It is this which comprises the "sheer intentionality" of radical practice. Our starting point must therefore be with ourselves. We must begin by considering how we shall think about the specifically human qualities in ourselves; we shall have to think of women and men in their social relations.

The models of human nature we need to develop—exhaustive of the possibilities from which we have to choose—will serve us in devising images of what the Good Society can be. A major premise for this task is this: the Good Society exists within the world of social planning in which we live and work and that is dominated by the state. As an intelligible whole it constitutes a rational and moral theory of social order that is meant to work as the "genetic code" in social transformation. Its metamorphoses, achieved in social practice within the medium of the present setting, will therefore generate still other wholes in a rough likeness of itself.

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The Good Society is neither ideology, nor plan, nor a utopia. As ideology it would merely confirm existing practice and leave us where we are. As plan or blueprint it would be constrained by the necessity for compromise, being either coopted into the world of social planning or cast aside as unfit to survive in it. And as utopia, finally, the Good Society would be remote from life, a realm of speculative thought.

The Good Society is brought into a living presence to the extent that we accept it as a source of moral valuations and as a form of social practice. As a source of moral valuations it has to be designed according to an adequate conception of what it means to be a human being. As a form of social practice it carries this conception into the public realm through radical struggle and exertion. The Good Society is thus a way of acting in the public realm; it is as well the destination of its practice.

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The Good Society is there for those who wish to choose it. To choose is to be free. It is a mode of being in the world, and it exists, it has existed, and it will always exist. Poised between being and nonbeing, the Good Society continuously creates and recreates itself in social practice. It is a temporary yet perennial form of social order.

Its "project" is a practice that is directed at the world beyond itself, that vital space of public appearance in which we are confirmed in our being here, and speech comes to be joined to social action.

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The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves . . .

Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the bios politikos, *namely action* (praxis) *and speech* (lexis), *out of which rises the realm of human affairs . . .*

. . . speech and action were considered coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind; and this originally meant not only that most political action, insofar as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment . . . is action. Only sheer violence is mute. . . . (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 1958)

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The Good Society extends itself in dialogue into the world of social planning. Subject to this world, it also stands arrayed against it, a constant challenge to its natural tendency to "totalize" social relations and make them more amenable to planning and control.

A corollary of this view is that the Good Society as such cannot be totalized. To do so would convert it into yet another instrument for domination. Not to dominate but liberate the other into a social practice of his own: that is the real project of the Good Society.

The match is an unequal one. In dialogue the Good Society commands its principal weapon. From this constraint derives its strategy for action: to work in the interstices of social planning, creating a cell-like web of Good Societies engaged in always shifting patterns of separate yet common struggle.

Pressing the struggle from within, the Good Society achieves within specific settings a partial transformation of the world of social planning and the state.