Oscar Wilde's Artificiality and the Logic of Genuine Pluralism

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Abstract

Wilde's artificial, nonsensical aesthetic is really a magnificently rigorous and just pluralism. His artificiality of style and wit presents the serious and un-artificial possibility of things' being <u>essentially</u> otherwise than they are understood to be in any given standpoint. His aesthetic impact in fact consists in a fresh opening of essential or constitutive or ontological spaces or standpoints. But this opening of spaces is thoroughly self-canceling, and so is <u>also</u> a validation of essential spaces <u>exactly as they are</u>. This validation, then, involves self-canceling recognition of <u>mutually exclusive</u> "spaces." The principle at work is that constitutive difference between standpoints involves the meaninglessness of the organizing categories of each position to the others. A position that aims to understand and communicate with incompatible positions must therefore recognize the genuine meaninglessness of its own claims to them, and vice-versa. In this way, paradoxically, mutually exclusive positions can be related without obscuring their mutual exclusivity. Wilde's nonsensical aesthetic, as expressed in both his fictional and critical works, is exactly this kind of paradoxical coordination.

Key words: aesthetics, artificiality, difference, pluralism, style, Wilde.

Wilde's Artificiality and the Logic of Genuine Pluralism

I shall argue that Wilde's artificiality of style and wit exemplifies both the logic and method of genuine pluralism, and does so in an unusually consistent way. As I shall discuss, the well-known current approaches to pluralism stop short of genuine pluralism in two ways. One kind of approach recognizes genuinely different standpoints: standpoints that are irreducible to each other, and so mutually exclusive of each other. But because mutually exclusive standpoints mean different things by the "same" concepts, these approaches disallow rational debate, or even coherent relations, between them (e.g., Kuhn, 1970; MacIntyre, 1988; Taylor, 1985, chaps. 3-5). These approaches have consequently been criticized for leaving us without a coherent way of thinking in terms of more than one standpoint at a time (e.g., Davidson, 1984; Rorty, 1991, pp. 25ff., 215-216), and so without pluralism. The other kind of approach allows different standpoints to be related to each other, but does so on the basis of shared principles, and so eliminates their mutual exclusivity, their genuine difference. This again eliminates genuine pluralism. Both results are consequences of taking for granted the unrestricted and exclusive validity of classical non-contradictory logic and ideas of consistency, for which it is impossible to combine both mutual exclusivity of standpoints and a coherent relation between the standpoints.[1] But, as I shall try to show, in the context of pluralism classical consistency itself requires certain kinds of contradiction. And I shall argue that Wilde's artificiality of style and wit works with a recognition of this further developed understanding of consistency or logic, and as a result allows mutually exclusive positions to be related without obscuring their mutual exclusivity.

Specifically, I shall argue that Wilde's artificiality, without ceasing to be frivolous (in fact, through the way in which it is frivolous), presents the very serious and un-artificial possibility of things' being essentially otherwise than they are understood to be in any given standpoint. I shall characterize his aesthetic impact or import as a fresh opening of essential or

constitutive or ontological spaces or standpoints. Given the use of the word "oppressive" in phrases like "an oppressive atmosphere," his opening of constitutive spaces is a social and political intervention. I shall argue further, however, that this opening of spaces is thoroughly self-canceling, and so also a validation of essential spaces exactly as they are. This validation involves self-canceling recognition of mutually exclusive "spaces."

In the following sections I shall first discuss some of the current approaches to political pluralism. I shall then develop, with reference to Wilde's work, a preparatory theoretical context for discussing his own approach. In the next section I shall present his pluralism in the light of that context. Finally, I shall discuss Wilde's idea of art in connection with the logic of his pluralism.

Current Approaches to Political Pluralism

There are several well-developed current approaches to political pluralism. I cannot begin to do justice here to the thoughtfulness that has gone into these approaches, but the following sketches will be sufficient to show the contrast with Wilde's approach. In fact, as it will turn out, Wilde introduces directions of thought that the current approaches do not consider, so that these approaches can only be properly evaluated, in this context, after Wilde's view has become clear. But a brief initial contrast will be helpful.

One approach, political liberalism, argues that while it is historically clear that we cannot agree on substantive ideas of the ultimate good, all of us can recognize that we cannot avoid living with each other and our inescapable ideas of the good. Given that we are stuck with living with each other, we need to try to do so in a way that allows us to live satisfying lives. Consequently we need to leave ideas of the ultimate good to the private sphere, while establishing public rights that will allow us each to pursue our goods within the constraints of living together productively (Rawls, 1993, 1999).

Political liberalism, however, has been criticized on the grounds that our ideas of the

ultimate good cannot be sealed off so neatly from our views of appropriate rights and modes of living together, so that there is no neutral procedure, independent of ideas of the ultimate good, by which to decide rights (Kingwell, 1995, pp. 51ff.; Mouffe, 2000, pp. 22ff.; Warnke, 1992, pp. 2ff., 57ff.). In fact, it has been argued that the private-good-tolerant stance of political liberalism itself is just a particular view of the good masquerading as a neutral position (Kingwell, pp. 73-74; Mouffe, pp. 24-26). As Mouffe notes, Rawls' key "distinction between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable'," for example, is <u>defined</u> from a liberal standpoint in the first place, and so "helps to draw a frontier between the doctrines that accept the liberal principles and the ones that oppose them" (p. 24).[2] Political liberalism, then, while it allows debate between standpoints, does not really recognize the validity of <u>genuinely different</u> standpoints, but instead ultimately recognizes only <u>one kind</u> of rationality and so only one ultimate standpoint.

Another approach to pluralism is that of communitarianism, represented by, for example, MacIntyre (1988), Taylor (1985), and Walzer (1983). Here the idea is that rationality -- or sense-making, including political sense-making -- is itself necessarily a product of cultural norms, not of abstract, potentially universal principles. As a result there are different rational<u>ies</u>, and we need to find ways of deciding between them without relying on non-existent shared procedures of making sense and coming to conclusions. MacIntyre's proposal, for example, is that each tradition can be stimulated by others to criticize itself, by its own standards of rationality. Communitarianism too, however, has been criticized, on the grounds that, while it properly respects the plurality of standpoints, it gives no realistic means of allowing them to negotiate with other, and so can be unself-critically, brutally exclusive: rethinking one's entire tradition, for example, is at best enormously cumbersome (Kingwell, pp. 42, 120ff.; Warnke, pp. 20ff.). Communitarianism, then, while it recognizes genuinely different standpoints, allows little or no rational debate and decision-making between them.

A third approach is the more radical one of Laclau and Mouffe, who take a step in the direction of the developed understanding of consistency that I believe Wilde exemplifies. Laclau

and Mouffe, drawing on Marx, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Derridean deconstruction, argue that "It is never possible for individual rights to be defined in isolation, but only in the context of social relations which define determinate subject positions" (1985, p. 84). That is, each person's rights and even her/his individuality itself are constituted in relation to all the other positions that make up the person's social context. Accordingly, any one position's nature, and therefore its rights, can only be established by <u>first</u> taking account of the other positions in the society. Laclau and Mouffe argue, therefore, for a "plural democracy" (p. 184). But because each standpoint is defined in the context of the others, there is no independent, neutral standpoint that can serve as the pre-given foundation by which to assess the rationality of the others. What this plural democracy involves, then, is

> no longer a case of <u>foundations</u> of the social order, but of <u>social logics</u>, which intervene to different degrees in the constitution of every social identity, and which partially limit their mutual effects. From this we can deduce a basic precondition for a radically libertarian conception of politics: the refusal to dominate -- intellectually or politically -- every presumed "ultimate foundation" of the social. Every conception which seeks to base itself on a knowledge of this foundation finds itself faced, sooner or later, with the Rousseauian paradox according to which men should be obliged to be free. (p. 183)

And they point out that each kind of political struggle -- homosexual, feminist, ethnic, workers', for example -- "retains its differential specificity with respect to the others" (p. 182).

But, on the other hand, if we take the <u>differences</u>, the mutual exclusivity, of standpoints as a foundation, we are really still thinking in terms of another kind of common ground: a single identifiable <u>universal community</u> of <u>differences</u>. In this way we eliminate pluralism again:

> if each struggle transforms the moment of its specificity into an absolute principle of identity, the set of these struggles can only be conceived of as an <u>absolute system of differences</u>, and this system can only be thought as a closed totality. That is to say, the transparency of the social has simply been transferred from the uniqueness and

intelligibility of a system of equivalences to the uniqueness and intelligibility of a system of differences. But in both cases we are dealing with discourses which seek, through their categories, to dominate the social as a <u>totality</u>. In both cases, therefore, the moment of totality ceases to be a <u>horizon</u> and becomes a <u>foundation</u>. (pp. 182-183)

Laclau and Mouffe are concerned, then, to allow for genuine pluralism, not by finding common ground, but by taking the <u>absence</u> of common ground as a basis for the solution.

Discursive <u>discontinuity</u> becomes primary and constitutive. The discourse of radical democracy is no longer the discourse of the universal; the epistemological niche from which "universal" classes and subjects spoke has been eradicated, and it has been replaced by a polyphony of voices, each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity. This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to "the truth," which can be reached only by a limited number of subjects. (pp. 191-192)

The step that they do not take, however, and that I shall argue Wilde does, is to take into account the implications of this conception for the statements of <u>this conception itself</u>. As Laclau and Mouffe themselves argue, the ways in which fundamentally, logically different positions understand themselves are at least in some respects meaningless to each other. Genuinely different standpoints ultimately do not share their basic meanings and sense of what is rational. Consequently, if one is to take genuinely different positions rigorously into account, without deciding between them on the basis of a neutral foundational position, one has to grant the validity of positions for which <u>this pluralist conception</u> itself is <u>meaningless</u>. Otherwise, it makes its own meanings the foundations for the thought of all standpoints. Precisely <u>such</u> a pluralist conception, then, must make spaces for positions in which totalities and universals <u>are</u> valid terms. This is <u>required for the aim of positions like Laclau and Mouffe's</u>, as well as supporting the standpoints opposed to theirs.

Mouffe's later work does note the dimension of paradox required for a properly democratic politics, in that we need both to aim at a cooperative, unified community overall and also to recognize the inescapability of irreconcilable differences within any community (2000, p. 56). But she still does not apply her reflections to limiting the scope of her own standpoint as only one among others, with the result that, as she insists, the paradox is in no way resolvable (p. 16).

I turn now to the way in which Wilde's artificiality successfully relates mutually exclusive standpoints while respecting their mutual exclusivity.

Preparatory Ideas: Wilde's Concern with Constitutive Change and Difference

It will be helpful to begin by looking at how difference needs to be conceived in the context of radical or constitutive change from a current standpoint or set of circumstances.

A position that aims at <u>constitutive</u> change, change in the very nature of the things it deals with, aims to produce a position whose "natures" or meanings are incompatible with the ones it starts with, unthinkable in its own initial terms. That is, a position that aims for constitutive change aims to remove the conditions that make it meaningful. As Wilde writes, in <u>The soul of man under socialism</u>,

> It will, of course, be said that such a scheme as is set forth here is quite unpractical, and goes against human nature. This is perfectly true. It is unpractical, and it goes against human nature. This is why it is worth carrying out, and that is why one proposes it. For what is a practical scheme? A practical scheme is either a scheme that is already in existence, or a scheme that could be carried out under existing conditions. But it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to; and any scheme that could accept these conditions is wrong and foolish. The conditions will be done away with, and human nature will change. (1966, p.1100)

A position that aims at constitutive change, in other words, aims to cancel itself. If it is to

understand itself and present itself accurately, it must therefore take into account the self-cancellation of its own meanings. That is, it must take into account the meanings, <u>incompatible with its own</u>, of the aimed-<u>at</u> position it establishes in canceling itself.

But, since this self-cancellation is <u>still to be achieved</u>, the intervening position, the position that aims at change, must <u>also</u> be considered in the context of its <u>own</u> meanings, since these are still the meanings that constitute it. Now, as I have just argued, the position at which it aims is unthinkable in terms of these meanings. That is, while it remains true that the intervening position must take into account the meanings of the aimed-at standpoint, it is <u>also</u> true that the intervening position must be considered <u>entirely</u> on its own, <u>without</u> reference to its self-cancellation in favor of the other position. In other words, it must (also) be considered dogmatically. It rightly does not take into account, whether to criticize or justify itself, the terms of the position it is specifically opposed to, the position at which it aims in canceling itself.

Let me stress that in this context the meanings of the aimed-at position are <u>correctly</u> registered as not really being meaningful. That is, they are correctly registered as artificial, imaginary, unreal, trivial, frivolous, and/or superficial. The constitutively intervening position must rightly operate as dogmatically and closed-mindedly with respect to the position it aims at, as the most dogmatic of positions that refuse change or recognition of constitutive difference.

The intervening position, then, must <u>both</u> ignore the meanings of the aimed-at position in the context of the assumptions that make them realistic <u>and also</u>, because it aims to cancel itself in their favor and establish them, take those same meanings into account.

In other words, accusations that thinking about fundamental social and political change is indulging in fairy tales are quite right. And what is more, thinking that aims at this kind of change is <u>itself</u> rigorous only when it also recognizes the truth of this description. But while this description is right, and excludes a description of profoundly interventive thinking as realistic, it does not <u>simply</u> exclude it. It is only one of two mutually exclusive, correct descriptions. And as I have just argued about mutually exclusive standpoints in general, they are meaningless in each

other's terms. Consequently <u>each</u> of these descriptions is, paradoxically, <u>the exclusively correct description</u>.

While this formulation violates classical logic, it is a consequence of thinking out the nature of constitutive difference in standpoints by the principles of that same logic. That is, it is a violation required by classical logic itself. This is, in other words, one of the logical paradoxes that classical logic itself is well-known to produce (see, e.g., Sainsbury, 1995, chap. 6, on the validity of these paradoxes).

If this is formulation is accurate, it shows that the paradoxical combination of mutually exclusive standpoints, without eliminating their mutual exclusivity, is sometimes logically required. It should help, then, to make sense of and re-direct the focus of negotiation in a lot of otherwise apparently interminable contemporary political debates. Mutually exclusive standpoints can each be right while still also mutually excluding each other's being right.

Given the shifts that this formulation expresses between the reality and unreality of genuinely different standpoints in relation to each other, it should also help to show the direct relevance of non-realistic artistic fantasy and sensibility to realistic pluralist political theory and practice.[3] As Wilde expresses the coordination of these incompatibles in <u>The picture of Dorian Gray</u>,

> But perhaps it had been only his fancy that had called vengeance out of the night, and set the hideous shapes of punishment before him. Actual life was chaos, but there was something terribly logical in the imagination. It was the imagination that set remorse to dog the feet of sin. It was the imagination that made each crime bear its misshapen brood. In the common world of fact the wicked were not punished, nor the good rewarded . . . . (p. 151)

Wilde makes room for incompatible standpoints and commitments in general in both his critical works and his purely fictional ones. He does so in both content and style. The dialogue "The critic as artist," for example, repeatedly diverts itself to lines of thought explicitly unrelated

to and incompatible with what has just been very persuasively said. At one point, Gilbert disagrees with Ernest:

> But I don't wish to destroy the delightfully unreal picture that you have drawn of the relation of the Hellenic artist to the intellectual spirit of his age. To give an accurate description of what has never occurred is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of parts and culture. Still less do I desire to talk learnedly. . . . No; let me play to you some mad scarlet thing by Dvorak. (p. 1015)

Later, he breaks off another argument (his own) with, "But I see that the moon is hiding behind a sulphur-coloured cloud. . . . I am tired of my expedition into the dim, dull abyss of facts. There is nothing left for me now but the divine μονόκρονος ≡δονή [momentary pleasure] of another cigarette. Cigarettes have at least the charm of leaving one unsatisfied" (p. 1019, insertion added). Again, having proved his point with a wealth of historical evidence, he twists out of the binding backing of his own proof: "But, to get rid of the details of history, which are always wearisome and usually inaccurate, let us say generally, that the forms of art have been due to the Greek critical spirit" (p. 1021). The art of the "critic as artist" makes room for constitutively alternative spaces at least to this extent.

Wilde's wit is often taken to express absurd, unmotivated divergences from sensible life, with no rational relation to the standpoints he addresses. But I suggest that it is, instead, characterized by both the logic and humanity of making spaces for human possibilities. In The picture of Dorian Gray, for example, he writes:

> As he looked back upon man moving through History, he was haunted by a feeling of loss. So much had been surrendered! And to such little purpose! There had been mad wilful rejections, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear, and whose result was a degradation infinitely more terrible than that fancied degradation from which, in their ignorance, they had sought to escape. . . .

Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to

recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our

own day, its curious revival. (p. 104)

For

it appeared to Dorian that the true nature of the senses had never been understood, and

that they had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve

them into submission or to kill them by pain, instead of aiming at making them elements

of a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant

characteristic. (p. 104)

And, he asks, "Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we

can multiply our personalities" (p. 112).

In fact, Wilde characterizes even this life-nurturing commitment, in turn, as belonging to

only one standpoint, and so as not necessarily the final word: "Such, at any rate, was Dorian

Gray's opinion. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in

man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with

myriad lives and myriad sensations . . ." (p. 112).

Roditi (1986), for one, comments on the fact and degree of Wilde's rigor, "In all the

confusion of late Victorian criticism . . . Oscar Wilde's ingenious, imaginative, and vigorous

dialectical thought appears monumental" (p. 4). He also points out that Wilde in fact works as

much with traditional structures of careful thought as he departs from them:

Wilde does not seem to have believed, moreover, that only new and confused art-forms

could express the novelty and confusion of modern life. Like Baudelaire, he tended to

adhere to traditional forms, even to revive them; he is more neoclassical, closer to Byron

or even Pope, especially in his orderly handling of narrative, than Tennyson or Browning

. . . And this very art involves a complex body of critical beliefs which it illustrates more

or less clearly. (pp. 3-4)

Wilde's Pluralism Proper

But Wilde is not principally concerned with aiming <u>at</u>, achiev<u>ing</u>, liberation from injustice, oppressive exclusion, and cruelty. He is principally concerned with <u>having achieved</u> it <u>already</u>, and so has no need to operate in the terms of the standpoints he opposes. As he writes in "The critic as artist,"

> Don't let us discuss anything solemnly. I am but too conscious of the fact that we are born
> in an age when only the dull are treated seriously, and I live in terror of not being
> misunderstood. Don't degrade me into the position of giving you useful information.
> Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing
> that is worth knowing can be taught. Through the parted curtains of the window I see the
> moon like a clipped piece of silver. . . . Let us go out into the night. . . . Who knows but
> we may meet Prince Florizel of Bohemia, and hear the fair Cuban tell us that she is not
> what she seems? (pp. 1015-1016)

Analogously to the relation of an intervening position to its aimed-<u>at</u> position, but in reverse, in Wilde's <u>achieved</u> position the meanings of the contrasting intervening standpoint from which it has emerged do not exist for it as meanings to be taken seriously. The very idea of justifying itself with respect that contrasting standpoint is consequently meaningless. Differently expressed, it is, again, rigorously or self-critically appropriate to be dogmatic with respect to that position.[4]

But in the achieved position <u>the aim of getting there</u> -- the <u>point</u> of occupying that position -- is not given. In fact, in one's current, achieved standpoint considered entirely on its own, it makes no sense even to ask the question of how or why one got to where one already is. Without reference to a contrasting standpoint, a standpoint cannot even be thought of as a particular standpoint, and so as being a particular place one got to, or as having a particular existence that can consequently have a point. The aim or point of being there -- the complete justification of one's standpoint -- is <u>only</u> to be found in the <u>preceding</u> position that aimed at

one's standpoint, or in a currently contrasting position that is still in the process of coming to understand one's own.

But, as I have argued, that previous or genuinely contrasting position is unthinkable in the terms of the achieved one. As with the sense of interven<u>ing</u> positions, then, the full sense of Wilde's work is given only with the sense of standpoints that have no meaning for his own. Accordingly, in order to understand his work, one has to locate not only the incompatibilities <u>within</u> his work, but also the incompatibilities <u>with</u> his work, between what is thinkable in his terms and what is not.

The impact of the following typical passage, from <u>The picture of Dorian Gray</u>, quite clearly shows this logic of the mutual relations and even dependence of mutually exclusive standpoints:

> Dorian was one of [Lady Narborough's] special favourites, and she always told him that she was extremely glad she had not met him in early life. "I know, my dear, I should have fallen madly in love with you," she used to say, "and thrown my bonnet right over the mills for your sake. It is most fortunate that you were not thought of at the time. As it was, our bonnets were so unbecoming, and the mills were so occupied in trying to raise the wind, that I never had even a flirtation with anybody. However, that was all Narborough's fault. He was dreadfully short-sighted, and there is no pleasure in taking in a husband who never sees anything." (p. 134, insertion added)

The "bonnets right over the mills" idea starts off as a simple figure of speech, just an aptly extravagant adornment to a statement about the unrestrained desire of the lady's youth. Quite fluently and without comment it becomes, for no good reason, the prominent center of the following statement. And in that statement it is also said, but marginally -- sandwiched between and so falling into the shadow of two or three strikingly unexpected statements -- that the lady was extremely restrained in her youth ("I never had even a flirtation with anybody"). This second statement contradicts the first.

Now, the second, contradicting statement is only given a marginal status, while mitigating reasons that promise to make sense of it are given a central stress. But they, in turn, immediately cancel or contradict themselves as mitigating reasons. To say, for example, that the mills were raising the wind is also to say, "do not take this phrase as fulfilling the purpose it usually does in this grammatical context." The contradiction is made, mitigated, and unmitigated again, all in interweaving and immediately mutually interfering ways.

And, further, the two statements do not <u>simply</u> contradict each other. The functions and so the meanings of their organizing categories shift. At first, desire is offered as a motive force and the figure of speech is marginal and trivial. Later, desire is marginal or trivial and what was formerly the accidental content of the figure of speech becomes the motive force. Center and margins, substance and ornament, switch places, so that in fact two standpoints are presented whose relevant sense-making categories do not correspond. Given their respective meanings, what one standpoint must rightly take to be the serious, primary issue, the other must rightly take to be trivial and secondary. Beyond contradicting each other, then, they also transform the issue, so that they are no longer talking about the same thing at all.

But they have achieved this state of affairs, paradoxically, precisely <u>by</u> talking about the same thing and transforming it in relation to each other. That is, they <u>both</u> conflict with each other <u>and</u> shift the sense of the topic altogether out of the range of each other's meanings. And they do both of these incompatible things in the same act.

My suggestion is that this switching of basic categories -- or, what comes to the same thing, of the whole standpoints structured by those categories -- <u>the fact that</u> it occurs and so <u>can</u> occur as it does, is what gives this passage its peculiar impact. If so, what characterizes this impact is the sense of the <u>possibility of essential or constitutive change</u>, or the possibility of things' being essentially different from what they are currently rightly taken to be. This passage of Wilde's is, after all, as I have just argued, structured by constitutive change and difference of constitutive, sense-making categories.

Each region of meaning here <u>reconstitutes the other's relevant meanings</u> to accord with its own categories of what is meaningful, <u>and so excludes</u> the other's meanings from the available range of possible meanings. And in each case this reconstitution or alteration is <u>obvious</u>, so that the meanings are <u>also not</u> altered (otherwise the alteration would be unnoticeable). And the passage as a whole contains both regions of meaning and both sets of "translations." The passage as a whole presents the components of rigorous recognition of essential or constitutive disparity of positions.

The content and tone of the passage also substantiate this suggestion, in that they constitute a self-canceling movement from the discussion of an agitating consideration ("she was extremely glad she had not met him in early life") to a transformation of the entire significance of the topic. The agitating factor is not only eliminated, but, again, the <u>category that makes the agitation possible in the first place, that of desire, is itself trivialized</u>. And since this presentation of the possibility of fundamental difference or change is self-canceling, moving through <u>nonsense</u>, it <u>also presents the validity of things just as they were/are</u>, without constitutive change or recognition of difference.

The extravagantly nonsensical element, the humor or absurdity, is the effect of the constitutive character of the difference and change. It is this constitutive difference between the positions at issue that makes the meanings clash in this extravagantly nonsensical way. Conversely, the extravagant character of the nonsense here is additional confirmation that the structure of constitutive change or difference really is in the passage, and really is conveyed by the passage. The extravagantly nonsensical element can only retain its significance and impact because the distortion of the relation between priorities across positions is still in effect and still felt. And this distortion, in turn, can only be in effect because the sense of the first position's relation between trivial and important is still maintained in reaching the second position. That is, the sense of the first position's own viewpoint is still maintained in the second position's viewpoint.

These different constitutions of sense are simultaneous and dependent on each another. A description of the impact of this passage is incomplete without including both of them. But they are also incompatible. Each of them excludes the sense of the other. That is, they are both necessarily compatible and wholly incompatible. What makes them belong together is the character of the aesthetic impact of the passage. Wilde's aesthetic nonsense is how their incompatible fitting together is accurately conveyed.

The ending of "Lord Arthur Savile's crime" also gives the aesthetic sense of this mutually sustaining relevant irrelevance of constitutively different or changed positions and meanings. The story is subtitled "A study of duty." It begins with a chiromancer, Mr. Podgers, favored by Lady Windermere, who predicts that Lord Arthur will commit a murder. Lord Arthur is horror-struck, but, wanting to marry his beloved, Sybil, with a clear future, he decides to get the murder over with and behind him. After failing repeatedly with various targets, he finally murders the chiromancer, and so can marry Sybil with hopes of living happily ever after. The story ends with a visit by Lady Windermere to the couple:

> ". . . Do you remember that horrid Mr. Podgers? He was a dreadful imposter. Of course I
> didn't mind that at all, and even when he wanted to borrow money I forgave him, but I
> could not stand his making love to me. He has really made me hate chiromancy. I go in
> for telepathy now. It is much more amusing."
>
>   "You mustn't say anything against chiromancy here, Lady Windermere; it is the only
> subject that Arthur does not like people to chaff about. . . ."

Lord Arthur arrives, and Lady Windermere questions him directly:

> "You don't mean to say that you believe in chiromancy?"
>
> "Of course I do," said the young man, smiling.
>
> "But why?"
>
> "Because I owe to it all the happiness of my life," he murmured . . . .
>
> "My dear Lord Arthur, what do you owe to it?"

"Sybil," he answered, handing his wife the roses, and looking into her violet eyes.

"What nonsense!" cried Lady Windermere. "I never heard such nonsense in all my life." (p.192)

The story begins, then, with a preposterously unrealistic, artificial pretext on the author's part: Lord Arthur is completely convinced by the chiromancer. This conviction reverses his initial romantic attitude that the world essentially works well:

it was . . . the comedy of suffering that struck him; its absolute uselessness, its grotesque want of meaning. How incoherent everything seemed! How lacking in all harmony! He was amazed at the discord between the shallow optimism of the day, and the real facts of existence. He was still very young. (p. 176)

But Lord Arthur nonetheless proceeds to behave on the basis of that abandoned attitude. The story comes full circle when he kills the chiromancer, and in so doing restores romance, exclusive of all horridness, once again. As Wilde describes their future, "For them romance was not killed by reality. They always felt young" (p. 191). The catalytic incident that made room for the initial artificial pretext is then itself discovered to be -- perhaps -- artificial, a fraud: "that horrid Mr. Podgers . . . was a dreadful imposter." But what this incident artificially led to was pragmatically real. The catalytic artificiality becomes -- perhaps – genuine. To which Lady Windermere, who was the one who introduced it as genuine, responds: "What nonsense! . . . I never heard such nonsense in all my life."

The artificial pretext reverses romance. This reversal in turn reverses itself: it becomes the means of establishing romance. This in turn reverses the chiromancer's lack of credibility, the very artificiality of the foundational artificial pretext itself, which as a result becomes undecidable as to whether it is artificial or genuine. Finally, this whole process, including the undecidability of its basis, reverses and displaces itself, keeping itself as it was, alongside its reversal ("What nonsense!" Lady Windermere says of the now inescapably genuine results), and with the impact of each sustaining that of the other. The result is a simple humorous and joyous

impact of undecidable nonsense that is even undecidable as to whether it is undecidable nonsense. It has the simply and clearly graspable outcome of a simply established love that is exuberantly nonsensical at the same time.

We are brought, not to a position of pure artificiality, nor to a position of simple pragmatic reality, but to an undecidability between them. And this undecidability does not, as in standpoints that aim <u>at</u> radical change or difference, primarily subvert all certainties of position (like the Maoist commitment to "perpetual revolution," or Lacanian psychoanalysis, for example). Instead, with full consistency, it is undecidable even as to its own being undecidable – its undecidability is not decidably what it <u>itself</u> is, so that in being <u>fully</u> undecidability it also undoes itself (while of course also still being itself). As a result it <u>recognizes and celebrates</u> all certainties of position as much as it questions them. This includes, crucially, those that are not Wilde's.

This is a critically or undogmatically dogmatic stance, not acknowledging positions that it also acknowledges, and its logic is given in the very specific impact of Wilde's aesthetic nonsense. The simple, decidable coherence of <u>the standpoint that presents</u> this undecidability is itself given in the <u>specific comic impact of the fact that</u> the story exists as it does. This impact and standpoint <u>are</u> the coherence or specificity of the story as the story it is. In presenting the story, this undecidable position presents in the same act and above all the <u>simple fact of</u> its also-self-undoing undecidability. That is, it presents above all the principle that it <u>itself</u> is possible and graspable as a particular position.

This presentation of the simple fact of its own possibility is especially important. In general, recognition of the simple fact of one's own position, whatever it may be, as a <u>particular</u> position, is already indirectly recognition that there are contrasting positions that are possibly valid. And once one constitutive difference or change is shown to be imaginable, as in this story, the idea of constitutive difference or change in general is shown to be imaginable. But since Wilde's particular position is already constituted as a coordination of fundamentally contrasting

positions, recognition of the simple fact of <u>his</u> position in particular is a <u>direct</u> recognition of

the principle that combinations of incompatible positions and meanings may be simply thought

and lived.

And this includes, again, of course, combinations <u>other than Wilde's</u>.

It is also significant that Wilde coordinates pure artificiality and pragmatic reality in

constituting the same meanings in this story. As I have argued, what is primary, serious, and

soundly practical for one standpoint can be secondary, trivial, and artificial for another, and an

account of a situation involving both standpoints needs to include both incompatible construals

of the same thing. As Cecily puts this kind of paradox in <u>The importance of being earnest</u>, when

Algernon has confirmed that he wants to discuss something "very serious": "In that case I think

we had better meet in the house. I don't like talking seriously in the open air. It looks so

artificial" (p. 355).

Let me elaborate, a little, the importance for Wilde's position of standpoints for which his

own is simply trivial, artificial, and negligible. Wilde does not <u>simply</u> repudiate the positions

from which he essentially differs or moves away, positions in which constitutive difference or

change is unthinkable. (Although, in keeping with the logic of relating mutually exclusive

positions, he does <u>also entirely</u> repudiate them, <u>in addition</u> to accepting them.) On the contrary,

his work is defined by the juxtaposition of standpoints that maintain their mutually exclusive

incompatibility. As a result, without reference to positions that wholly contrast with his own, his

own standpoint disappears. This means that he must, and does, present his own position <u>partly in</u>

<u>the terms of the positions from which he is moving away or differs</u>. That is, <u>he must and does</u>

<u>present his own position in terms that exclude his own, and so as artificial and negligible</u>.

By presenting his position in the other position's terms -- by presenting it as artificial --

he articulates the fact of incompatibility simply as it is from the simple, non-paradoxical, non-

pluralist viewpoint of that other position, since it is in that position's terms that he presents his

own. <u>And</u>, since his own, contrasting position is in fact what he presents in the other position's

terms, he <u>also</u> articulates the fact of incompatibility as it is from his own, paradoxical, pluralist

viewpoint, as incompatibility combined with compatibility. That is, he not only articulates both

standpoints simultaneously, but he articulates <u>the relation between</u> the standpoints

simultaneously from both standpoints' points of view, so both pluralistically and non-

pluralistically. In other words, Wilde's pluralism is sufficiently consistent to make room for non-

pluralistic standpoints that wholly exclude his pluralism.

 The same logic of balanced incompatibility structures "The sphinx without a secret."

Gerald is in love with Lady Alroy, who lies to him: she secretly goes to a certain address at

regular intervals, but denies it. Eventually he finds proof, confronts her with it, and insists on

knowing what she does there.

> She stood up, and, looking me straight in the face, said, "Lord Murchison, there is
>
> nothing to tell you." -- "You went to meet some one," I cried; "this is your mystery." She
>
> grew dreadfully white, and said, "I went to meet no one." -- "Can't you tell the truth?" I
>
> exclaimed. "I have told it," she replied. (p. 218)

As a result of this confrontation, he rejects her. Then he finds out she has died, goes to the

address she used to visit, and is told by someone who opens the door:

> "She paid me three guineas a week merely to sit in my drawing-rooms now and then." --
>
> "She met some one here?" I said; but the woman assured me that it was not so, that she
>
> always came alone, and saw no one. "What on earth did she do here?" I cried. "She
>
> simply sat in the drawing-room, sir, reading books, and sometimes had tea," the woman
>
> answered. (p. 218)

At the end, Gerald asks the narrator of the story, "Now, what do you think it all meant? You

don't believe the woman was telling the truth?" "I do," replies the narrator. "Then why did Lady

Alroy go there?" Gerald asks.

> "My dear Gerald," I answered, "Lady Alroy was simply a woman with a mania for
>
> mystery. She took the rooms for the pleasure of going there with her veil down, and

imagining she was a heroine. She had a passion for secrecy, but she herself was merely

a Sphinx without a secret."

"Do you really think so?"

"I am sure of it," I replied.

He took out the morocco case, opened it, and looked at the photograph. "I wonder?" he

said at last. (p. 218)

The "I wonder" at the end positions the tale perfectly. Either she really did have a secret,

or the bare fact that she would go to such lengths to pretend to have a secret is itself a mystery or

secret. In the end each position is the same as the other, but with a reversal of meanings: of the

fullness or emptiness of the content of the secret, of what is mundane and what is remarkable

(Lady Alroy's mundane or merely imaginary activity itself becomes what is remarkable), of what

is significant and what is signified (her doing nothing significant becomes what is significant,

rather than signifying a further mystery), and of what is marginal and what is central (her

mundane time in the room becomes central, in place of other activities to which it would be

incidental). And Wilde leaves us poised exactly with <u>both</u> options, with the impact of both, <u>and</u>

of the unresolved choice of either and/or both of these options.

Wilde's Idea of Art and the Logic of Pluralism

I suggest that this recognition and celebration of the certainties of <u>all</u> positions <u>including</u>

<u>their exclusions of the certainties of other positions</u> is, for Wilde, the meaning of art. In <u>The soul</u>

<u>of man under socialism</u> he insists that "Art is the most intense mood of Individualism that the

world has known." And the beauty of a work of art "comes from the fact that the author is what

he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want" (p. 1090). The

ideal he presents here is that society should be structured so that <u>everyone</u> can live without

concern for other people's incompatible wants. That is, his position involves exclusion of the

certainties of other positions <u>and</u> affirmation of their rightful exclusion of the certainties of his

own position. The possibility of doing this, he believes, is found in art.

He also describes art itself in mutually exclusive ways. In <u>The picture of Dorian Gray</u>, for example, he writes, "All art is quite useless" (p. 17), but in "A few maxims for the instruction of the over-educated," "Art is the only serious thing in the world," to which he adds, "the artist is the only person who is never serious" (p. 1203). I have been arguing that there is a logical necessity in statements of this kind, the realistic logic of the kind of thought and society that Wilde believes are true to human existence. The engagement of art with the world, whether it is a political, moral, theoretical (or, for that matter, a lunch) engagement, does not lie in art's having a simply realistically effective dimension, but in the realistic significance <u>of its pure artificiality</u>. For, given, on the one hand, the mutual exclusion of the meanings of different standpoints, each rightly construes the meanings of the others as purely artificial, nonsensical. But given that they nonetheless also co-exist, and that each has as much or as little right as the other to be taken as the starting point and so as the standard of meanings, the very same pure artificialities switch over into being genuine and in fact basic meanings. In the relations and negotiations between genuinely different standpoints, then, pure artificiality, <u>as pure artificiality</u>, engages with reality <u>as a profoundly logical pragmatism, purely exclusive of artificiality</u>.

This self-incompatible Wildean kind of statement, to the extent that it is justified by the logic of pluralism, requires the nature of logical necessity itself to be rethought. In this context, this necessity is not simply: necessary and not frivolous. It is not simply: necessary <u>despite</u> its frivolity. It is: both of these; <u>and</u>, necessary <u>and</u> as it happens frivolous; <u>and</u>, necessary <u>because</u> it is frivolous; <u>and</u>, frivolous despite <u>and</u> because of its necessity.

Wilde's kind of art both presents and <u>is</u> the critically justified logic or sense of suspending one's (or equally the other's) critical rigor, of thoughtfully presenting oneself (or equally the other) dogmatically, without concern for one's potential uncertainties, without justification or attention to one's presuppositions. Where standpoints are constitutively different, the other standpoints that might meaningfully question one's ultimate standards of sense and

truth are, when <u>undogmatically, critically, taken into account</u>, meaningless or purely artificial for one's own achieved standpoint, and vice-versa. And without such contrasting standpoints, there is no meaningful question about one's ultimate standards of sense and truth: one's own standpoint would rely on those standards even in asking that kind of question. One is self-critically justified, then, in not reflecting self-critically on one's point of view.

The impact/import of Wilde's kind of art, then, both contains the justified fact of simply being who one is, without need for justification – that is, it expresses that one's existence is truly its own justification -- and carries that principle through to the incompatibly justified fact of conflicting others' simply being who they are, without need for justification. "The true personality of man," he writes in <u>The soul of man under socialism</u>,

> . . . will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. . . . (p. 1084)

Part of the impact of Wilde's work, then, lies in the absence of justification for it outside of its own being what it is. There is no adequate reason for his having structured, for example, "Lord Arthur Savile's crime" precisely as he did. Its structure did not follow logically from any way of making narrative sense that preceded it, and so the sense and justification of that structure could only be considered after it had already come into existence. In other words, it opened up a new constitutive or essential space. And that it came about for no adequate reason in this way, and works in ways that have no adequate reason, is the chief beauty and marvel of it. And as a marvel, as resulting in an utter, incomparable freshness in relation to what precedes and surrounds it, that it came about for no adequate reason is its full justification.

Wilde's aesthetic presents the simple coherence or specificity of this self-incompatible principle, pragmatic and artificially imaginative, justified and justifiably unjustified, and yet <u>also simply single</u> by virtue of the single aesthetic impact that its undecidable artificiality makes. Wilde expresses the structure of the coherent, single impact of this nonsensical artificiality,

undecidably opening spaces for meanings that the current meanings exclude, in "The young king":

> "Where is this dreamer of dreams?" they cried. "Where is this King, who is apparelled like a beggar -- this boy who brings shame upon our state? Surely we will slay him, for he is unworthy to rule over us."
>
> . . .
>
> And the young King came down from the high altar, and passed home through the midst of the people. But no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel. (p. 233)

To re-emphasize the other side of this self-incompatible coin: explicit critical awareness is also required for this critical dogmatism to come about. In "The critic as artist" Gilbert says, "it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand" (p. 1021). According to him the antithesis between the unself-questioning creative and the self-reflective critical faculties is "entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name" (p. 1020).

But, again, attention to one's own presuppositions -- the appropriate entry into the often inappropriate activity of rigorous questioning and debate -- belongs to the kind of position that aims for something, or aims to understand a different position. The kind of position that achieves what the former aims for is in this respect constitutively other than that former position, and must include in some sense a constitutive absence of such attention, a dogmatism. And since both mutually irrelevant kinds of position are required to understand either, they must, again, be thought paradoxically, simultaneously in both a thoroughly critical and a thoroughly dogmatic style.

The following description from The picture of Dorian Gray shows again how elaborately

Wilde situates himself in this kind of context: he writes of "loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin" (p. 101). The opposition of the evaluations considered here is both sharply maintained and thoroughly undone, and in a way that depends on simultaneously thinking the positions that give those evaluations their meaning. The "renunciations" are "mere artificiality," and "unwisely called virtue." These descriptions of the Christian renunciations come from a position opposed to that in which they are wise and sober, and so, in fact, in which they are <u>renunciations</u>, in the Christian meaning, at all. The "natural rebellions," on the other hand -- a modern, post-Christian idea, a reconstituted understanding of passions -- are "wisely" still called "sin." These descriptions belong to the Christian position, opposed to that in which these "natural rebellions" are what <u>they</u> are.

The second statement reinstates the Christian position, understood in its <u>own</u> Christian terms. The first statement already upheld the modern position in <u>its</u> own modern terms. And these confirmations emerge from a position in which <u>both</u> positions are upheld <u>simultaneously</u> each in the other's terms. The Christian position is upheld for its artificiality, the modern position for its sin.

The reader is put in both of the familiar positions, each exclusively of the other, since each retains its own meanings. The reader is also placed in each position as it is reconstituted in the other's terms. <u>And</u>, the reader is also placed somewhere entirely new, in a position that can recognize <u>both</u> of these particular standpoints in their mutual exclusion. As a result, the reader can also recognize the possibility of new, unforeseen, constitutively different standpoints in general, and, further, the possibility of their relating to one another without eliminating their mutual exclusivity.

In short, as Wilde expresses it in "Phrases and philosophies for the use of the young," "The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves" (p. 1205).

Notes

1. For an account of some alternative, non-classical logics, see Priest (2001).

2. Commenting on Rawls' statement that reasonable people "have realized their two moral powers to a degree sufficient to be free and equal citizens in a constitutional regime, and . . . have an enduring desire to honor fair terms of cooperation and to be fully cooperating members of society" (1993, p. 5), Mouffe writes, "What is this if not an indirect form of asserting that reasonable persons are those who accept the fundamentals of liberalism?" (p. 24), rather than, say, people who recognize the inescapable antagonisms belonging to any society.

3. There is a long-standing current of Marxist and neo-Marxist thought, for example, that finds dimensions of truth in areas that are also farthest removed from sober concern with truth. Ernst Bloch, for instance, is a rigorous neo-Marxist who also emphasizes daydreams, fairy and folk tales, wishes, and fantasy (1988). My proposal is that the principle of Wilde's thought and style offers a rigorous justification of this kind of combination.

4. A variety of leftist currents of thought have worked centrally with Kant's notion of the "(self-) critique of reason" (Marx's Capital, for example, is subtitled A critique of political economy), specifically to avoid dogmatism and the consequent blind imposition of political ideologies. In that context, the critically appropriate lack of justification I discuss here might be called post-critical dogmatism.

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Biographical Sketch

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