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THE BUSINESS OF THE ETHICAL PHILOSOPHER

Tom Regan

In the opening pages of Principia Ethica, the young G. E. Moore—for Moore was not yet thirty when he wrote this historically influential work—remarks that "it is not the business of the ethical philosopher to give personal advice or exhortation." Moore clearly is not saying that ethical philosophers overstep the bounds of their discipline if they endorse some general rule or principle, or declare that certain traits of character are virtuous. In *Principia*, Moore himself does both. Rather, he is arguing against the propriety of ethical philosophers, in their capacity as ethical philosophers, of issuing advice or exhortation regarding facts that are, in his words, "unique, individual, absolutely particular."2 "There are," Moore writes, "far too many persons, things and events in the world, past, present, or to come, for a discussion of their individual merits to be embraced by any science. Ethics, therefore," he goes on to say, "does not deal at all with facts of this nature, facts that are unique, individual, absolutely particular; facts with which such studies as history, geography, astronomy, are compelled, at least in part, to deal. And, for this reason," he concludes, in the words already quoted, "it is not the business of the ethical philosopher to give personal advice or exhortation."

I think Moore is partly right, and—maybe—partly wrong. He is right certainly when he implies that no ethical philosophy—no science of ethics—can possibly address all the facts of the sort he describes, of which, as he notes, there are "many million." But he is mistaken, I believe, to the extent that he implies that ethical philosophers necessarily have wandered off the straight and narrow path of their profession if they choose to consider some such facts—the particular case of Baby Jane Doe, for example, the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti, or the

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construction of the Tellico Dam. To my mind, at least, it is entirely appropriate for moral philosophers to consider the "individual merits" of such matters and, depending on their findings, to register their judgment, for or against.

Possibly Moore would agree. I say possibly because, in evaluating the merits of the Baby Jane Doe case, for example, we are not evaluating just *one* "unique, individual, absolutely particular" fact. In the nature of the case, we are obliged to consider a *constellation* of many such facts, the child's present condition and the evidence for alternative predictions about her future, for example, not simply one fact standing alone, in isolation from everything else. Thus, if Moore means that ethical philosophers should not assess the merits of such constellations of facts, I believe he is mistaken, whereas if he believes that it is only atomic facts, as it were, that are beyond our reach, then perhaps he is correct.⁴

But there are, of course, many other things that ethical philosophers will be called upon to do, if, or as, they are tempted to swim in the turbulent waters of the everyday world. One needs the *relevant* facts, after all; and the more, the better, whether the question is the construction of a hydro-electric dam or the electrocution of convicted murderers. And one needs to think about these facts, and other relevant matters, with logical care. One needs, too, a good dose of conceptual clarity, a nose for logical nuance, a mind cleansed, so far as this is possible, of insupportable bias or prejudice. And one needs, besides, some well-considered moral principles about what is right and just, good and evil. A tall order, this, by any reckoning, an ideal which, perhaps, we are wont never fully to realize, try as we might.⁵

For many moral philosophers alive today what I am saying is more in the nature of orthodoxy than heresy. Applied ethics, or practical ethics, is part of the contemporary moral philosopher's bag of tools, and all that I am saying, I think, is that it is appropriate that we have and use these tools in a responsible manner in the conduct of our professional life. That this represents an important change in the conception of ethical philosophy compared to the dominant conception of, say, sixty or fifty or even thirty years ago, is evident to anyone familiar with twentieth century Anglo-American ethics. The meta-ethical questions that set the agenda for ethical philosophers back then, I think, have not been so much answered as they have been tabled, at least temporarily, and I have no doubt, the cyclical swing of thought being what it is, that we are in store for another heavy, healthy dose of meta-ethical philosophy in the coming years. But for now at least, to find a place for practical or applied ethics within the profession is mainstream: "to the max," one might say.

Still, there is a difference, or so I am willing to concede, between applied ethics and advocacy and values. In one sense, it is true that anyone who argues for any conclusion, moral or otherwise, can be said to advocate that conclusion. Suppose we call this the *logical* sense of "advocacy." In this sense, Kant advocated the categorical imperative, Moore, some form of utilitarianism, and

Russell—well, Russell advocated almost everything, at one time or another, from Bradleian idealism to the theory of descriptions. But in another sense, advocacy involves something more. Consider standard dictionary definitions of the nouns, "advocate" and "advocacy," and the verb, "to advocate." Thus the noun "advocate" is defined as "a person who defends, vindicates or espouses a cause by argument"; the noun "advocacy," as "an act of pleading for or giving verbal support to a cause"; and the verb "to advocate," as "to plead in favor of; support or urge by argument; recommend publicly." What unifies these definitions is the idea of doing something in favor of—defending, vindicating, supporting, pleading—a cause. Suppose we refer to this sense of "advocacy" as the normative sense. In arguing for their respective philosophical views about the Absolute and the present King of France, neither Bradley nor Russell, I take it, fit the label of "advocacy" in this sense. For neither saw himself, in making the respective claims each did, to be arguing for, let alone "pleading for or giving verbal support to ... a cause."

This concept of advocacy—the one that is bound up with advocating in favor of a cause, the one I have called the normative sense, differs from the logical sense. Philosophically considered, a work of advocacy, in the normative sense, is one that, while attempting to adhere to standards appropriate to the profession. articulates certain goals, the "cause" which the work itself advocates. These goals may find their original articulation in such a work, or they may pre-date the work. Works of advocacy by environmental philosophers, feminist philosophers, socialist or capitalist philosophers, animal liberation or animal rights philosophers. for example, may be of either kind; they may, that is, either constitute the original articulation of the relevant goals, or they may add their voice to pre-existing goals. These goals, in turn, may be, to create a new word, status-quoist, reformist, or abolitionist. The cause advocated may be (1) to retain the current state of affairs, including certain policies or practices, in particular; (2) to reform the current state of affairs by keeping certain policies or practices in general, while reforming them various ways; or (3) to abolish—to bring to an end—certain policies or practices. The history of philosophy is crowded with works of advocacy in the normative sense, works that fit one or another of these descriptions.

In addition to the logical and normative senses of "advocacy," which to my mind are beyond philosophical suspicion or controversy, there is a third sense which needs to be distinguished. Suppose we call this the *political* sense. In this sense, advocacy involves more than affirming a position, as in the logical sense, and more than writing an essay or book that advocates a cause, as in the normative sense. The political sense involves active public participation in efforts to forward the cause, efforts that go beyond advocacy in the logical or normative sense, such modes of advocacy as attempting to exert pressure on those who hold political office; helping to organize boycotts; speaking at conferences, rallies or demonstrations, with the intention of informing or empowering other activists; or participating in marches, or in sit-ins and other forms of civil disobedience, for

example, all in the name of furthering the cause. The question now to be asked, is whether this kind of advocacy of a cause—what I have called political advocacy—is "the business of the ethical philosopher."

My own answer to this question is, no. In saying this, I do not mean that philosophers should not actively engage in such political means of advocacy as demonstrations and civil disobedience. On the contrary, I not only believe that such political advocacy is entirely appropriate, I have myself been a political advocate, both in the anti-war and the animal rights movements in each of the ways I have indicated.

What I mean in answering the question as I do is this: when philosophers engage in such activities as these, they do so in their capacity as concerned citizen, not in their capacity as ethical philosopher. The grounds for their political advocacy of the cause they advocate, their reasons for believing the cause is just or right, are likely to be distinctively philosophical—the very grounds they may have articulated in the essays or books that advocate the cause, in the normative sense. My point is only that once philosophers enter the political arena, the arena of political pressure and public protest, they do so, not as philosophers who happen to be citizens, but as citizens who happen to be philosophers. So, in my view, it is not the business of the ethical philosopher, qua ethical philosopher, to be an advocate in the political sense. Philosophers who engage in such extraphilosophical activities, I believe, do so, not in the name of philosophy, but in the name of political or social change. Which is fine, I hasten to add. It is just not philosophy. I return to this matter below.

But while political activism is not the business of the moral philosopher qua moral philosopher, being a moral philosopher should not paralyze the philosopher's political will. More than being logically consistent, it makes moral sense to take our moral convictions out of the study and into the street, if one thinks that one's sense of personal integrity demands it. Moral philosophers are not immune to bouts of bad faith, moments when we explain away our failure to assume the role of political activists in the cause we defend philosophically because, we say, assembling at the barricades is not the business of the moral philosopher. Our ivory towers should not a prison make, and while I do not wish to argue here that an unwillingness to enter the political struggle necessarily casts doubt on the sincerity of someone's moral convictions, a fuller, more complete life arguably demands political activism, not simply normative theory.

Whatever we might think on this matter—and I assume we may not all be of one mind—moral philosophers, in their capacity as moral philosophers, clearly can do more than write learned articles or books. For it is philosophy, and thus part of the business of the moral philosopher, when, as increasingly happens, philosophical advocates of a cause offer a summary of their philosophical advocacy—their normative position. Suppose the philosophical advocate is invited to some campus or to some other public venue, to give a forty-five minute talk for

the non-philosophical public. Is it reasonable to assume that the finer details, the nuances of, say, a four-hundred page book can be condensed into forty-five minutes? Only the authors of *Cliffs' Notes* will be tempted to suppose so. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to expect and demand something by way of philosophy, a sketch, in the nature of the case, by way of philosophical advocacy in the normative sense, from the ethical philosopher. Granted, it is damnably difficult to say in a comparatively few words what it has taken one many more words to say to one's own best satisfaction. Still, even within these time constraints, and even in the face of an audience of the philosophically unwashed, ethical philosophers can do ethical philosophy. We can allude to some of the relevant facts, exhibit the logical form of some of the most important arguments, and diagnose some of the possible prejudices. It is, let us agree, not philosophy at its best and fullest. But this is no reason to say that it is not, or that it cannot be, philosophy at all.

Because more and more ethical philosophers are turning their attention to advocacy in the normative sense, an ever increasing number are finding themselves in the position I have just described. Philosophers working in health care ethics, business ethics, and professional ethics, for example, regularly participate in conferences where the majority of those in attendance are not professional philosophers. I believe this is a salutary development, both for the profession and for society at large. It is, however, a mixed blessing. The very increase in participation by philosophers in society's grappling with the major moral issues of the day can create a family of unwelcome problems, some personal, some of more general interest to the profession. As ethical philosophers, I believe we are well advised to be aware of what some of these problems are. At least my experience in response to my advocacy suggests as much.

That experience has been largely, but not exclusively, gained from my involvement in the animal rights movement. A number of my philosophical writings advocate animal rights in both the logical and the normative sense. The same is true of many of my public lectures, including those presented on various campuses. Moreover, as I have already indicated, I have also been an advocate of animal rights in the political sense, having participated in sit-ins, protests, rallies and the like. Philosophically, the position I advocate is abolitionist in nature. I argue that the nonhuman animals who are raised for food, killed for reasons of fashion, and "sacrificed" in the name of science, for example, are treated unjustly; further, that the injustice of these practices cannot be eliminated by reforming them in various ways, for example, by increasing the size of cages: and that, therefore, the right thing to do is to abolish these practices altogether.

Whether true or not, my position certainly can be perceived as a threat to the interests of others—for example, those whose career and livelihood are tied to business-as-usual in commercial animal agriculture, the fur industry, and the biomedical industrial complex. As I have discovered, some of those who are

threatened, including high-ranking academics, voice their disfavor with my ideas about animal rights in the vocabulary of slander.

In what follows I relate some of my experiences. In doing so, I hope I will not be misunderstood. I have not chosen to highlight some more or less recent occurrences in my life for reasons of self-aggrandizement. My interests, rather, are to determine what, if anything, might be learned from the treatment I have received as an advocate of a cause; to consider how this might possibly benefit others who are contemplating or who already are engaged in such activity; and, generalizing on my experience, to speculate about some of the threats and challenges we face, not individually and alone, but collectively, as a profession. As my experience illustrates, philosophical advocates of some causes may need to be prepared to encounter vicious, personal, and demeaning professional attacks. I have been called a dangerous zealot, a firebrand, a rabble rousing demagogue. I have been likened to Hermann Goering, to monomaniacal mental patients who think they are Jesus Christ or Napoleon, and, on one occasion, I was described as the Jim Jones of the animal rights movement. Concerning my campus lectures, I have been accused in them of advocating violence, which is false; of spreading lies, which is false; of being anti-science, anti-rational, and anti-intellectual, which is false; of asserting that I have the right to impose by violent means my notion of ethics on others, which is false; of inflaming my audience to commit unlawful acts, which also is false. On another occasion someone suggested that I am the point man, so to speak, for laboratory break-ins, which is false; and on still another someone implied that I was under investigation for the crime of murder, an absolutely groundless allegation. Finally, my The Case for Animal Rights has been dismissed as entirely lacking in scholarly merit, of being a lengthy tendentious non-sequitur in which I substitute zealotry for reasoned argument -- a work in which my appeals are entirely emotional.

Now philosophers cannot relish the opportunity to be the target of ad hominem attacks, or to be on the receiving end of remarks that slander their character or degrade their professional standing. All this is bad enough. What is worse—and here I believe my experience does not differ qualitatively from that of many other philosophers who advocate other causes—is the realization that the attacks aimed at me are part of a larger, national strategy, involving powerful political figures and professional organizations. By way of example, consider first the following statement contained in the American Medical Association's 1988, "Animal Research Action Plan." "The animal activist movement must be shown to be not only anti-science but also . . . responsible for violent and illegal acts that endanger life and property."

Next consider these remarks by Frederick K. Goodwin, M.D., former Administrator, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Association: "The animal rights movement is, in large part, a young persons' movement, and it is made up of young people who tend to substitute sentiment for reason. In effect, they are

saying, 'Because I feel strongly about not using animals in research, it's true for me." Goodwin goes on to dismiss, in a tone of righteous indignation, what he calls the "facile, pathetically misinformed, and/or dishonest arguments" animal rights advocates urge against animal research. 10

Lastly, for present purposes, we have the declamations of former United States Representative Vin Weber (R-MN), founder of the Animal Welfare Caucus, contained in an invitation to a fundraising event featuring Health and Human Services Secretary, Dr. Louis Sullivan: "It is my pleasure to invite you to meet a national leader in the fight to counteract the mindless emotionalism and violent tactics of the animal rights movement." Later on in his invitation Congressman Weber declares that "the tactics employed by the animal rights movement are nothing short of terrorism. . . . Calling animal rights activists' destructive methods arguments is giving them too much credit."

The list goes on. Certainly there is no difficulty in multiplying examples of this rhetoric of derision as practiced by people in high places, and, as my earlier remarks confirm, in lower places, too. What some research scientists have said about me in particular, in other words, had already been said by their national leaders about the animal rights movement in general. And this, as I have said, is important to understand. For the more an ethical philosopher's advocacy threatens powerful political and economic forces with a vested interest in the status quo, the greater the risk that the philosopher will be called upon to endure the slanderous attacks of those who are threatened. Individual ethical philosophers who choose to run this risk normally stand alone, without much by way of organized interest in or support from the larger philosophical community. Perhaps this is as it should be. After all, those philosophers who align themselves with a cause voluntarily choose to do so, and, so, arguably must be prepared to reap the sometimes bitter fruits of their advocacy. Nevertheless, the attack on advocates, if my experience is any guide, can cross the boundaries of the personal and encroach upon the profession, so that the attacks upon the individual and attacks upon the profession can become all but inseparable. The following two examples illustrate this point.

The first involves a scientist who registered his displeasure with my having been invited to his campus. He noted, fairly, that I lacked "an adequate scientific background." But then he argued that, for this reason, my presentation would not be "an open and objective, but [instead would be] a sophisticated rationalization of an emotionally [sic] and biased point of view." This is a familiar theme, at least as familiar as C. P. Snow's Two Cultures. Viewed from the perspective of the scientific component of Snow's two cultures, either one reasons from "an adequate scientific background," in which case one is able to conduct an "open and objective" discussion, or one speaks without the benefit of "an adequate scientific background," in which case one can at best muster something by way of "a sophisticated rationalization of an emotional and biased point of view." Given this perspective, to the extent that moral philosophers lack "an adequate scientific

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background," or are perceived to lack one, they will be seen as lacking the ability to offer an "open and objective" presentation, and will instead be seen as quasi or pseudo professionals who are able only to evince their emotions behind the smoke and mirrors of intellectual sophistry. In this way, individual ethical philosophers, who advocate a cause in the normative sense, can trigger slumbering dogmas about ethical philosophy in general. In a very real sense, then, part of the attempt to discredit the individual practitioner of ethical philosophy can consist in attempts to discredit the practice.

A second variation on this main theme was made clear to me by the comments of an influential psychology professor, who happened to be among the most vicious in his personal attacks upon me. Along with these attacks, the professor commented on what he saw as the *arrogance* of ethical philosophers who, in his view, assume that, because they "study ethics," they are "the guardians of other people's ethics." "In this country," this particular professor continues, "personal ethics is a matter for the individual conscience, and neither priest nor philosopher have an inherent right, or a widely acknowledged special expertise, that allows them to dictate to others, certainly not by violent means, the ethical judgments they should make."

These comments are perfectly general; they are not aimed at me in particular but at ethical philosophers in general. Even if we ignore the reference to "violent means," these comments, in my view, are confused. I myself do not know a single ethical philosopher who views herself or himself as the guardian of other people's ethics, or who believes that she or he is in a position to dictate what ethical judgments others should make. That ethical philosophers often advocate controversial ethical positions, in both the logical and normative senses of "advocate," is unquestionably true. And that, in doing so, they often argue in favor of, defend, attempt to vindicate or support a cause that is at odds with the ethical judgments of others, also is true. But neither of these truths entails anything about the philosophical advocate's assuming guardianship of other people's ethics or dictating to others what ethical judgments they should make. How widespread these misunderstandings are, I am unable to confirm in any detailed fashion. My own experience, both on my campus and beyond, however, suggests that they are very widespread indeed. The advocacy of individual ethical philosophers can occasion vigorous if misinformed indictments of ethical philosophy in general. Once again, therefore, part of the attempt to discredit the individual practitioners of normative advocacy can consist in attempts to discredit the practice.

Perhaps we might learn something useful from the family portrait of ethical philosophers that emerges from the preceding. To begin with, there appears to be something of a time-lag between the pace at which philosophy changes, on the one hand, and the pace of change observable in the non-philosophical community of scholars, on the other. For even while it is true, as I observed earlier, that the metaethical questions that dominated Anglo-American moral philosophy for a large

part of the twentieth century have not been so much answered as they have been shelved, it seems very unlikely that when we return to them with greater collective concentration, we will do so only in order to exhume the ghost of logical positivism, which seems to be the epistemological ideology that underlies the unflattering family portrait of ethical philosophers summarized in the above—the disreputable image of what it is to be an ethical philosopher.

Second, and relatedly, the sheer staying-power of the assumption that science is objective while arguments about value are emotional attests to the not-tooblissful ignorance, on the part of some academic scientists, of much of the recent work in the philosophy of science. Recognition of this fact might serve the salutary function of reminding us of the importance of familiarizing the next generation of scientists with this literature, lest this harmful assumption continue to hold sway. So that, third, there is in my view a real need for philosophers, both ethical philosophers and philosophers of science, to make greater contributions to the real education of scientists, in our classrooms and beyond. But, finally, doing this likely will not be an easy task. If, unlike science, which is valorized because it is objective and rational, ethics is denigrated because it is subjective and emotional; and if, unlike scientists, who discover the truth, ethical philosophers are perceived to be people who want to dictate other people's values, then the sometimes cool, the sometimes hostile reception scientists shower upon the suggestion that their students need a course in ethics is hardly remarkable. Clearly, the challenge ethical philosophers must face, in discussions about curricular change in the sciences, is likely to be formidable.

However these matters are to be resolved—and I claim no special wisdom regarding the solutions—my central points are these: that philosophical advocates of a cause, while they speak for themselves, often are perceived as representatives of ethical philosophy in general; that when, as sometimes happens, efforts are made to discredit the individual philosopher, the efforts sometimes will include attempts to discredit the profession; and that in choosing to assume the role of philosophical advocate of a cause, individual ethical philosophers should realize that, like it or not, they may be called upon not only to defend their views and endure slanderous attacks upon their person, but also to explain and defend the discipline of ethical philosophy itself. None of this, in my view, constitutes a sufficient reason for not electing to advocate a cause, in the normative sense, if the force of argument leads one to such a conclusion; but it does, I think, go some way toward suggesting the variety and magnitude of the challenges one might face, if one decides to do so.

I turn now to my final point. It concerns academic freedom. Those who have most vehemently attacked me, both personally and as a scholar, frequently have insisted that they were not denying my right to free speech. As one of my principal detractors wrote: "Anyone, from Farakkhan to Regan, has a right to speak on a university campus no matter how abhorrent his views are to any segment of the

community." This *sounds* eminently fair, and it would be fair if philosophical advocates, including those with "abhorrent views," could be assured that the traditions of academic freedom will prevail in their case. Not surprisingly, such a guarantee requires sustained vigilance.

On my own campus, for example, certain individuals who strongly disagree with my views on animal rights once objected to my participation in a campus program because "North Carolina State University should not be perceived as supporting Tom Regan's position on animal rights because it might offend research funding organizations and cause the loss of grants." In this case, fortunately, the sponsors refused to be intimidated and the program went on as scheduled. However, it was only by accident that I discovered the existence of this attempt to silence my voice. And this, as I say, was on my own campus, where I have taught for twenty-five years.

On other campuses, the main story line differs. Sometimes objections are voiced because I am said to be a violent terrorist who will incite my audience to riot. In fact uniformed police and other law enforcement officers have attended my campus lectures, "just in case" At other times it is because "the issue is not one of intellectual debate consecrated by our commitment to academic freedom, but rather one of anti-intellectual actions that have been specifically condemned by our Academic Senate." Whether one who practices anti-intellectual actions should be permitted the academic freedom to perform them is less than clear.

Nevertheless, despite efforts to the contrary, to the best of my knowledge my freedom to speak, both on my own campus and elsewhere, has never been denied. In this, I have been fortunate indeed. Clearly, if those people who had invited me to speak had failed to insist upon my right to do so, I would have been denied the exercise of this fundamental right.

This, then, is a final dimension of philosophical advocacy that is worth considering. Precisely because such advocacy can threaten powerful, entrenched special interests, one can anticipate various efforts aimed at silencing the advocate. Moreover, because the advocate is an ethical philosopher, and in view of the fact that attempts to discredit the advocate sometimes include allegations that discredit ethical philosophy in general, those of us who are ethical philosophers, in my view, have, if anything, an even greater obligation to insure that the traditions of academic freedom prevail.

Perhaps all that we should do, as professionals, can be done effectively by using the resources of already existing committees within, say, the American Association of University Professors and the American Philosophical Association. If this is true, then by all means let us honor Occam's sage advice, and not multiply committees beyond necessity. But it is worth asking ourselves, both those of us who are advocates in the normative sense and those who are not, whether something more is needed, even if we conclude, after informed reflection, that nothing is. On this matter, even Moore, who had well-considered views about the

business of the ethical philosopher, would agree.

Notes

- George Edward Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1903). p. 3.
- 2. Ibid.
- 3. Ibid.
- 4. There is, perhaps, a certain tension in Moore's views, given his famous method of isolation as an approach for judging which things are good in themselves. For those things which are judged best by him, are certain facts, certain states of consciousness, which perhaps can lay some claim to being "unique, individual, absolutely particular."
- For somewhat lengthier comments on this ideal, see, for example, my "Introduction" to Matters of Life and Death, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).
- The Random House College Dictionary, revised ed. (New York: Random House, 1981).
- 7. A number of academic research scientists, whose views about animal rights differ fundamentally from mine but who had observed first-hand the style and substance of my campus lectures, kindly wrote letters in my defense—letters in which they indicated their sense of outrage over how I was being treated by some of their peers. Unless otherwise indicated, the accusations I list and the material I quote are contained in letters and other communications written in response to my having been invited to offer a campus lecture. Because no good purpose would be achieved by identifying either the authors or their respective institutions by name, I have chosen not to do so. I should also add that some members of the biomedical and animal agriculture community have raised their voices in my defense.
- "Use of Animals in Biomedical Research: The Challenge and Response," An American Medical Association White Paper (Chicago: American Medical Association, 1988).
- 9. Frederick K. Goodwin, "In Animal Rights Debate, the Only Valid Moderates Are Researchers," *The Scientist*, 67 (September 1993), p. 6.
- 10 Ibid
- 11. The material quoted is from Weber's invitation, on Congress of the United States