

Critical pivot

The Substance of Thought, Cornell University, NY, 10–12 April 2008

The stated goal of The Substance of Thought was to assess and intervene in the present theoretical conjuncture by zeroing in on the conflict between post-Kantian ‘critical’ philosophy and the speculative bent of recent philosophies displaying an allegiance to ‘pre-critical’ or ‘classical’ metaphysics. In making this distinction the conference organizers (members of the Cornell University Theory Reading Group) referred to Badiou’s judgement (in his *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*) that ‘any philosophy may be qualified as classical that does not submit to the critical injunctions of Kant’ but rather considers ‘the Kantian indictment of metaphysics as null and void’. Citing Negri and Althusser along with Deleuze and Badiou as avatars of a return to the pre-critical vocation of metaphysics, while listing Adorno, Benjamin, Heidegger, and Derrida among ‘those who continue to take up various trajectories of Kant’s critical legacy’, the conference called for ‘work that takes a stand on the conflict between the two camps’ and for ‘interrogations of the nature of critique, the fate of aesthetics, the privilege accorded to immanence or transcendence, and the status of materialism’.

This description of the current situation is apt to raise any number of objections. It effectively positions Badiou (taken here as spokesperson for the pre-critical) as a privileged arbiter of contemporary philosophical orientations, while simultaneously setting up the fate of the Kantian legacy, one way or the other, as the decisive question for contemporary thought. But this chiasmatic framing of the ‘camps’ under investigation turned out to be productive in so far as it encouraged an approach towards each from the perspective of the other, rather than the stubborn entrenchment on opposing sides of those defending either position. Though participants were encouraged to take a stand on the conflict at issue, the real strength of the conference was a collaborative atmosphere in which it was neither pre-critical dogmatism nor the dogmatic defence of critique itself that prevailed, but rather a range of efforts to think through the conditioning of contemporary philosophy by the problems of transcendental idealism and to explore new perspectives upon the latter that might be gleaned from recent efforts to dislodge its indictment of metaphysics.

Three distinct approaches emerged over the course of the weekend.

1. *Granting the ongoing pertinence of ‘classical metaphysics’ (if not exactly the ‘nullity’ of critique) and thus exploring the contemporary status of pre-, post- and non-critical philosophies.* Returning to Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza’s two parallelisms, Dustin McWherter attempted to map ‘the regional immanence of thought’ and the asymmetrically mutual inclusion of thought and existence onto the relation between transcendental subjectivity and its empirical instantiation in Kantianism. Floyd Wright addressed the status of the infinite in philosophies of substance via Jean-Luc Marion’s reading of Descartes, positing the infinite as a ‘compulsion’ of thought rather than the function of a limit. Ioannis Trissokas cast the constitutive problematic for the genesis of Hegelian idealism as Pyrrhonian scepticism rather than Kantian critique. Aaron Hodges teased out the conjunction of axiomatics and materialism by exploring ‘the decision to be a materialist’ in Badiou. My own paper attempted to outline a rationalist empiricism, or ‘empiricism of the encounter’, by linking Badiou’s theory of the subject with Hume’s problem of induction via Quentin Meillassoux’s thinking of absolute contingency.

2. *Defending the pertinence of transcendental idealism to contemporary metaphysics, in most cases by arguing against the reduction of the former to ‘critical philosophy’.* Michael Olson read Kant as a metaphysician of the object, prescribing an effort to extricate the problem of the object and its transcendental genesis from Kant’s subjective solution (contextualizing the efforts of Schelling and Deleuze in this regard). Karin de Boer explored the development of ‘immanent critique’ in Kant and Hegel, arguing that the capacity to reflect critically upon ‘the very idea of philosophy’ *within* a philosophical system (rather than refuting another philosophical system) remained a crucial vocation of thought with ineradicable ties to the Kantian project. Raoni Padui attempted to defend Kant against Meillassoux’s critique of ‘correlationism’ by insisting that Kant sought to establish the productive autonomy of science and philosophy, not the dependency of the former upon the latter.

3. *Pursuing alternative lineages and models of filiation.* Pointing to Badiou's relative silence on German aesthetics, Rob Lehman explored links between Badiou's inaesthetics and Baumgarten's science of the sensible. John Hicks investigated the problematic distinction between poetry and prose in Badiou, Gasché, Lacoue-Labarthe, Benjamin and Plato, interrogating the role of philosophy in determining the modern concept of the 'prosaic'. Nina Power excavated 'The Subterranean Current of Contemporary Feuerbachianism', positioning Feuerbach's philosophical anthropology as a link between Badiou (the generic), Virno (the general intellect) and Rancière (rationalist egalitarianism).

Two papers from a panel on 'The Althusserian Legacy' deserve particular attention. In 'The Politics of Metaphysics', Alexi Kukuljevic argued that Althusser's concept of theoretical praxis offers a non-Kantian model of 'critical philosophy', in so far as drawing a line of demarcation in the philosophical field affirms a certain critical dogmatism – a declarative instance in the absence of a criterion – as requisite for the production (rather than knowledge) of truth. Knox Peden's contribution, 'What is an Epistemological Problem?', read the mutual hostility between Althusser and his erstwhile teacher Jean-Toussaint Desanti as symptomatic of a larger conflict in twentieth-century French intellectual history between a 'Cartesian' phenomenology (via Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) and a 'Spinozist' rationalism (via Cavailles). Peden offered a case study of the complexity with which Spinozist and phenomenological trajectories intersect in postwar French thought, and the manner in which 'dogmatic' and 'critical' tendencies are inextricably woven into their mutual implication.

The pertinence of Althusserian epistemology was also evident in Alberto Toscano's keynote lecture, 'Raving with Reason: Fanaticism, Iconoclasm and Critique'. Linking the question of 'dogmatism' with 'fanaticism' via Kant's assertion of a direct link between the former and 'enthusiasm', Toscano characterized Badiou and Deleuze as 'iconoclasts of the multiple', in so far as they pursue the disobjectification of philosophy. From there, he proceeded to investigate two loci at which to address the contemporary politics of 'the substance of thought': the conditioning of philosophy by its institutional context and by capital. Contrasting Kant's pastoral politics of the institution in *Conflict of the Faculties* with Althusser's partisan philosophy, Toscano explored the institutional stakes of moving from a Kantian model of critique to contemporary modes of distinction and demarcation. He then approached the conditioning of thought by capital

through the concept of 'real abstraction' elaborated by Althusser and Alfred Sohn-Rethel. If we take the real abstraction called philosophy to be conditioned by (perhaps predicated upon) the real abstraction that is capital, then – Toscano argued – philosophy loses its critical self-legislation to capital qua substance of thought. The question then is not Kant's 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' but 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Capital?'

The second keynote lecture, by Simon Critchley, was a disappointing conclusion to the weekend. Critchley neglected to confront the conference theme, choosing instead to continue a feud with Slavoj Žižek that many no doubt feel has already grown stale. Hence his sensationalist title, 'Violent Thoughts about Slavoj Žižek'. The lecture itself was less dramatic, arguing that ethics involves us in a 'tricky, delicate dialectic between violence and non-violence', a 'dialectic' instantiated by invocations of 'non-violent violence' (Butler), 'war against war' (Levinas), 'law against law' (Benjamin), and 'the power of powerlessness'. One has only to follow through on Critchley's uninterrogated conflation of violence with 'killing' throughout his remarks to demonstrate the vacuity of these formulations. Does the delicate dialectic of ethics hinge upon our capacity to practise killing without killing? I would hazard a guess that Critchley's platitudinous appeal to 'the maximization of powerlessness' won few converts to the banner of 'principled anarchism'.

But one insubstantial keynote address was not enough to compromise the success of *The Substance of Thought*. In the context of an American academy wherein little or no communication occurs between 'analytic' philosophy departments and the 'theoretical' concerns of English, French, German and Comparative Literature programmes, this was a rare and encouraging instance in which it was precisely *thought* that sufficed to enable serious debates between representatives of philosophy and literature departments, without the sinking feeling that we were, after all, just playing incommensurable language games. If the confrontation of 'Critical and Pre-Critical' philosophies is a fashionable topic, the merit of an event like this was to ensure that current terms such as 'correlationism' and 'Speculative Realism' do not become *merely* fashionable. Taking a hard look at the critical pivot around which 'the return to philosophy' turns – or from which it has come unhinged – *The Substance of Thought* offered ample reason to hope that the poles of credulity and dismissal attending the American reception of deconstruction will not be repeated.

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