

Theory on the GrayLine Tour

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I thought a lead-in essay would be useful to sketch some issues and a possible historical narrative to the philosophy and theory debate, anticipating that it might operate as both a point of reference and as a model to be elaborated, contested, and adapted to other approaches. Thus, I present here what I tell my theory students is the “GrayLine Tour” of an important strand in the philosophy theory relationship, which can be used to understand some of what’s at stake when we align theory and/or philosophy with theatre. As well, I use this overview for two more specific reasons: first, because I want to activate, or re-activate, a critical engagement with theatre in all its textual, historical, and performative manifestations that to my mind encompasses theatre scholarship. This I think can only be accomplished when accompanied by an historical overview that traces the transformation of philosophy into critical theory. Secondly, I present what follows as a means to encourage students to see that every element of production—from acting to design to directing or authoring a play—is necessarily fraught with existential, one can even say philosophical, dimensions: that, as Herbert Blau used to say, “in every act of theatre there is already theory.”

But why not just as well say that theatre is always a manifestation of philosophy? My own answer is perhaps best couched in a distinction common to scientific inquiry, that is, between scientific theory and scientific law. I don’t imagine I’m alone in having experienced a typical initial confusion when a student confronts the use of theory in theatre studies by stating flatly, “Well, it all sounds wonderful, but it only applies to specific plays or performance modes (or acting styles or design vocabularies, etc.)” The assumption behind the response is that “theory” means an explanatory model that manifests a certain transcendental applicability. But in science this is certainly not the meaning of “theory,” where it designates a model by which one may work toward achieving any number of goals, only one of which may be a scientific law. As a mode of hermeneutics, theory is always speculative and rarely granted the status of a transcendental law. The current debates in the U.S. over the status of Darwinian theory (“if it’s not a law, then it’s not absolutely true, so there’s still room for creationism”) dramatize the continuing uncertainty of the terms both in scientific discourse and in cultural exchange.

Philosophy, I would venture, is a form of speculative thought, which—for historical reasons—acquires transcendental status (this is obviously truer of some philosophical inquiry than of others, most notably metaphysics). Rooted deeply in

the idealist mode of Greek thought, Western philosophy comes to mean theories that achieve the status of laws because their source lies in an ineffable region where variation, distortion and change cannot take place. Thus, in a complex history far beyond the scope of this essay, theory and philosophy are allowed to inhabit one another and come to mean essentially the same thing for a long stretch of Western history.

That this all changes in the modern period is a bit of a truism, but as with all truisms it has an interesting history which is relevant to the topic of theory and philosophy as they relate to theatre studies. And, while there's little point in trying to divine the exact origins of the shift, one could do worse than to locate its epicenter in the work of the Frankfurt School's early critiques. I have in mind especially Max Horkheimer's 1937 essay "Traditional and Critical Philosophy," which not only proposes a distinction between philosophy and theory, but also provides the appropriate methodology for locating that difference and a genealogical inquiry for interpreting it. Treating both terms historically rather than as immanent, Horkheimer both continues but also writes through and beyond the Enlightenment legacy and announces not only the difference between theory and philosophy, but as well the necessary victory of the former over the latter in the project of emancipation.

Now, there's little that's new in Horkheimer's notion that what distinguishes theory from philosophy are the respective functions of the two: philosophy is turned rigorously toward metaphysics while theory bends its gaze toward the social. Consequently, one devotes itself to pure speculation while the other proposes to cross over from theory to praxis, with all the attendant imperfections this implies. Such a response, by itself, would simply continue to render the terms as binary opposites, to the point one might rename Raphael's great paean to humanist philosophy in the Vatican "The School of Philosophy v. Theory." Alas, simply anointing Plato the metaphysician to Aristotle's materialist sociologist is not supported. Plato consistently, but especially in the *Republic*, treats philosophy as a mode of thinking that must produce action which has the power to emancipate individuals and communities within the material and social realm. *The Allegory of the Cave* is best understood, in fact, not simply as a purely utopian speculation on the ascent of the intellect and soul, but also as a mode of praxis which uses philosophy as the source of human liberation. In this regard Plato is already speaking in the rhetoric of the Enlightenment and in its theory-making terms.

However, the *Allegory* also strongly conveys the probable degenerative effects of the individual's liberation from slavery, and it is here that Plato's philosophy can be said to stop short of a truly modern notion of theory. Given that, in Plato's view, the emancipated individual would be seen as demented, demonic and subversive, and given that those remaining enslaved in the cave would be incapable of projecting a vision of freedom, the only alternatives available would be to

compromise seriously the vision of liberation that might be brought back to those still in chains, or else to force the unenlightened to become free. The forms in which such re-education would be suffered—banning all but the young and submitting even those to a rigorous course of indoctrination—are of course autocratic and doomed to failure or compromise. In a sense, then, Plato must simply ignore the philosophy/theory relationship because he has painted himself into an idealist corner in which theory is always already the sign of imperfection and compromise, the falling away from the idealities of philosophy and into the dirty work of transforming the very realities to which they are to be applied.

Still, as David Ingram writes, “It would be wrong to read the Republic as a gloss on the futility of philosophical idealism. What it tells us about philosophy and enlightenment, generally, is that the ideal demands of transcendent moral reason which emancipates us from the bonds of false social reality have to make their peace with this reality.”¹ The means to achieve such peace become available only as the location of such transcendent reason could be shifted from God to man. With Descartes there emerges a form of rationalism that seems to locate transcendent reason securely in subjective consciousness, and yet which at the same time holds out that such innate reason resides in the corporeal mind. This becomes historically quite important, as it allows very different theories to claim the same philosophical basis. For instance, those who read Descartes and choose not to emphasize the corporeality of reason may justifiably claim that reason is an essence that transcends time and space, and that rational actions proceed directly from the individual in the same pure and unmediated way by which mathematical proofs enter the world. If it is possible to argue that the true, the good and the beautiful can be grasped purely by subjective consciousness, then there is no need for an external entity to intervene and adjust or mediate those rational inclinations. On the other hand, if the corporeality of consciousness is given due weight, if “brain” is factored into the notion of mind, then reason itself is a kind of material substance and therefore susceptible to deterministic laws (especially temporal laws that must account for changes, transformations, and decay) as well as to material social practices which might equally be responsible for altering consciousness. In the latter version, reason is thus transcendent but also subject to influences which must be accounted for when rational practices are exercised in the real world. Descartes thus opens up forms of rationalism compatible to both Protestant laissez-faire capitalism (as well as the rampant individualism endorsed by the free and unmediated expression of acquisitive reason) and to the foundational Lockean ideas of the social contract and natural law. Cartesian rationalism, a servant of two masters, opens up the divide that will in the modern period oppose philosophy and theory in ways that finally become, in the eyes of the Frankfurt School’s critique, incompatible. But for Horkheimer to make the implicit claim that theory has surpassed philosophy required that he confront Kant’s great breakthrough into “critical philosophy,” as

well as its own limitations. Kant's critique of reason rested on the remarkable claim, and the crisis of rationality that it called into being, that reason does not in any simple manner correspond to reality.

Further, Kant argues that reality cannot be said to exist prior to consciousness, in the sense that an object may precede the mind that perceives it, the latter of which then attempts to render exact representations of them into a manifold that corresponds to reality. Proposing instead that the function of consciousness was to "legislate" the real, Kant derives the notion of a transcendental reason in which the mind is pre-wired to process all experience into a unified space-time continuum. Important in this regard is Kant's understanding that, given the corresponding loss of metaphysical knowledge that proceeds from fallible human consciousness now constituting an approximate version of the unified continuum, what must emerge is a heightened capacity for moral knowledge and action—that is, praxis. Humans, rather than anterior metaphysical ideals, become the ultimate source for values and the practices that create and maintain them. The famous categorical imperative dictates, in Ingram's words, that "to the extent we allow external authority, bodily desire, or unconscious prejudice to causally influence our behavior, we are neither fully free nor fully moral" (10). What makes for rational and moral action, in Kant's terms, is that one learns to step away from metaphysical ideals and turn toward understanding and theorizing how one may de-objectify the natural and social world and then to actively legislate it in accord with the dictates of transcendental reason.

Had Kant's imperative been couched in historical, rather than transcendent, terms, then the tale might well end here and Horkheimer would have seen little purpose in distinguishing between traditional and critical theory. But Kant's critical philosophy maintains, as the term indicates, traces of the idealism on which philosophy since Plato has been based. It would be Kant's German interpreters—Hegel and especially Marx—who would lay the groundwork for transforming critical philosophy into critical theory. By virtue of his dialectical methods, Hegel could posit that consciousness and "soul" come into being and then evolve through the twin contexts of labor and social interaction, altering the now transcendentless reason to the extent that by dialectical interaction of labor and society alone, history itself is transformed—and always toward the goals of purer reason and greater freedom. That Hegel could satisfy himself that the liberal monarchies of Europe and, especially, Prussia signaled the closure of this dialectic revealed how such an evolutionary view of reason could still serve conservative ends. It is Marx's signal transformation of Hegelian ideas into "*ideological* manifestations of real socio-economic forces" that lead, eventually, to the true split between philosophy and critical theory and which amounts, in Ingram's words, "to transforming philosophy into social science" (18).

Once philosophy is thus transformed it can never, according to Horkheimer,

regain its stature: it must always serve the greater purpose of informing theory which, itself, while never achieving the status of law (in the scientific sense), can nevertheless activate praxis. When I reach this point with my students, we have something of a rudimentary historical narrative by which to address questions germane to theatre studies. The application of the model to specific cases is often gloriously inelegant, as is the process of scientific research, but often quite creative. In terms of acting theory, the nature of linguistic as well as visual texts, the nature of audience reception, the phenomenology of the theatrical event, and so on (to name only a few), this “brief history of time” as it affects the dynamic relationship between theory and philosophy.

Notes

1. David Ingram, *Critical Theory and Philosophy*, (Paragon House, 1990) 3.

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